

Utility of Focus Groups in Retrospective Analysis of Conflict Contexts

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Abstract

This article addresses the challenges of conducting retrospective qualitative research in conflict contexts, particularly those stemming from the susceptibility of retrospective accounts to present narratives and contextual variations in the experience and interpretations of war. This article shows how focus groups combined with in-depth interviews can be used as a strategy to overcome these challenges. Drawing on empirical examples from research conducted in conflict settings, the article shows how focus groups can be instrumental in culturally anchoring the researcher and accessing the most reliable accounts of the past via unearthing the locally relevant wartime events and war-induced dynamics.

Keywords

focus groups, conflict research, retrospective accounts, reconstructed narratives, fieldwork

Introduction

Armed conflicts leave deep sociopolitical impacts on societies, and studying these effects is arduous as they are not time-bound. For example, researchers may find collateral or even direct effects of wars on identities, social relations, political order, or development even decades after the civil war has ended (Collier, 2003; Ember & Ember, 1994; Ghobarah et al., 2003; Jha & Wilkinson, 2012; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017). Understanding the mechanisms behind these effects requires retrospective analysis where the researcher closely engages with the history of conflict, wartime events and dynamics, collective memory, and personal experiences in times of conflict. Participant observation and in-depth interviews are oft-used methods for achieving this sort of engagement with the history of conflict (e.g., Fujii, 2011; Theidon, 2013; Wood, 2003). However, gathering individual narratives about the past is risky, as the accounts will be tainted by factors such as time, current ideologies, and official state discourses (Wood, 2003). Retrospective accounts are by definition reconstructed accounts (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Secondly, wars manifest themselves differently in each locality, and the gamut of wartime events and concomitant changing social dynamics vary by context. By conflict contexts, I am referring broadly to subnational localities in countries that underwent armed conflict. Usually, localities vary in exposure to conflict and in demographic composition, in particular the concentration of minority ethnic groups. It is essential that researchers know

these and other war-related specifics, such as war-induced new dynamics of interethnic relations or language sensitivities, to each context under study in advance of in-depth conversations. Understanding these contextual factors helps ensure the researcher is cognizant of pivotal events as well as sensitive topics and norms associated with the conflict. Yet this kind of information can be hard to access from secondary sources, posing additional challenges. This article offers a strategy to overcome such challenges with doing qualitative research in conflict contexts: deploying focus groups along with in-depth interviews.

This article draws on my research experiences examining the impact of intrastate armed conflict on political and social trust of the nonvictimized people (bystanders). Guided by my theory arguing that consequences of ethnic territorial wars on trust differ from the consequences of ideological revolutionary wars, I selected the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey as a case of ethnic territorial war and the Maoist insurgency in Peru as a case of ideological revolutionary war. The Kurdish insurgency in Turkey is a fight between *Partiya Karkêren Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK hereafter) and the Turkish

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state that began in 1984. The Maoist insurgency in Peru was fought between the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso del Partido Comunista del Perú*, or Sendero hereafter) and the Peruvian state between 1980 and 2000. Because I wanted to understand how wartime dynamics and events shaped trust relations, both interpersonal and political, most of the questions I needed to ask pertained to individuals' wartime experiences. All of this required me to probe deep into wartime events and individual memories through in-depth interviews.

I employed focus groups before and after a set of interviews in each locality as a leverage to get a more thorough perspective and overview of the wartimes in each context and as a tool to minimize the impact of present on past accounts and to get a sense of localized norms and wartime dynamics. I did 6 months of fieldwork each in Turkey and Peru, conducting over 60 interviews and over 16 focus groups across seven provinces in each country in 2013 and 2014. The research conducted was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Ethics Board, Certificate Numbers: H12-00452 and H12-03711 (and the renewal Certificate Number H1-03711-A001).

In this article, I explain how the strategic use of focus groups can help alleviate some of the problems researchers may encounter in retrospective inquiries in conflict contexts, particularly when focus groups are used prior to in-depth interviews. First, I will lay out the problems associated with retrospective accounts in conflict contexts. Next, I will discuss the utility of focus groups and then share select examples from my focus groups showcasing their function as a prelude to conducting interviews.

Issues With Retrospective Microlevel Data Collection in Conflict Contexts

Conducting qualitative research in conflict contexts is challenging. Ethical issues with causing emotional harm and the difficulty of establishing trust relations in a war-torn field await every researcher. What I will highlight here, however, pertains to additional issues relating to data quality.

For qualitative research addressing microlevel processes and individuals' perspectives, narratives are the main source of information. Narratives can be defined as stories of personal experience that are weaved together for a certain audience in a meaningful way (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Narrative is a powerful form of discourse and it is different from other modes of discourse in four ways. First, narrative usually demands agency where human beings have a role in the story. Second, narrative conveys the "the speaker's view of what is canonical" (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 316). As such, both the words spoken and silences matter. Third, narrative necessitates that events are ordered in some sequence and acknowledges that events are recounted and that they may not be real. Finally, narratives show how the speaker structures their experience. According to Patterson and Monroe (1998, p. 316), "the speakers create the context to be analyzed by drawing in what they consider relevant cultural experience." It is through collection of narratives that researchers can get a sense of how individuals

perceive events and how those events help shape individual attitudes and behavior.

Every narrative is constructed, yet narratives about the past is more so. They bear information tainted by present political views (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994; also see Wood, 2003), by official discourses relating to the events, identities—defined as "any social category in which an individual is eligible to be a member" (Chandra, 2006, p. 400)—and other people's interpretation. Furthermore, in conflict contexts, variations in sub-national understanding of conflict and war-bound norms and sensitivities make understanding and analysis of narratives challenging. Below, I first discuss problems with reconstructed accounts in reference to memory retrieval and then clarify how variations in contexts could pose challenges to data collection and quality.

Retrospective Questions: Personal Memories and Reconstruction

At a cognitive level, part of the process of narrative construction pertains to memory retrieval (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). Psychological research on autobiographical memory shows that there are different retrieval strategies depending on the accessibility of the memory: direct (for accessible memories), inferential/constructed (memories harder to retrieve, e.g., a more distant event), or both. Factors such as the retention interval, degree of firsthand experience, predictability of parts of an event, and the original emotional state of the individual affect the retrieval method. Affective valence associated with events—that is, whether a participant witness perceived the event as positive or negative—may change the way the memories are stored, associated, and retrieved. The findings suggest that positive events are retrieved more directly, while negative events are retrieved more inferentially. The accuracy of direct retrievals tends to be higher (since inferential retrievals are often reconstructed; Herrman, 2012). Hence, in conflict contexts, accuracy of the retrieved memories is often more compromised, as it is more inferential. Memories are often filtered through new information. As individuals integrate new knowledge to their past information, memories tend to change (see Loftus, 2017, for a review of false memory). Hence, some accounts of the past may be reconstructed to a greater degree than others.

The first strategy I employed to tackle this issue with inferential memory retrieval was to structure my interviews in a way that each respondent comments on a set of wartime events I ask about. Prior to my fieldwork, I prepared a list of wartime events that had resonated with the general public. For example, in Peru, I used the first democratic elections in May 1980, which also marked the beginning of the Sendero violence, and the widely covered Uchurraccay Massacre in 1983, where eight journalists were killed by the villagers who mistook the journalists as insurgents. In Turkey, the coup d'état in September 1980, massacres perpetrated by the Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish political leaders in the 1990s, and the capture of Öcalan (the founding leader of Kurdish insurgency) in 1999

served as some of the wartime events I evoked in conversations. I see these events as critical junctures, and by introducing these staple events, my purpose was to take the respondent back in time to these moments and have their narratives be pivoted around these events.

Inasmuch as anchoring the interviews around these critical junctures was useful, it did not help overcome many of the challenges associated with inferential memory retrieval. First of all, the meaning of these critical wartime events and national salience of these events were in large part shaped by the official state discourse surrounding the Kurdish conflict. By official state discourse, I mean reshaped historical accounts to serve the interests of the state.¹ In wartime, it is of primary interest for the state to disseminate its official discourse (describing the nature, reasons, and costs of the conflict), and the media are key in these communications (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar & Simon, 1993).² Individual interpretations of the past and hence individuals' narratives are inevitably shaped by these discourses. To get a sense of a more complete account of the past, researchers need to access alternative recounts, and focus groups provide a great tool to accomplish that.

Variations in Subnational Experiences of Conflict

Beyond the nationally salient wartime events, subnational sites had a myriad of other events during the war, especially localities that underwent clashes or attacks by insurgents/state forces have a whole different story to tell. Official historiographical sources may not have much information about attacks perpetrated by state security forces, or much of the local attacks may not have been reported in the media. Thus, using the nationally salient events as "anchors" may not prove fruitful for the purposes of tracing the past memories. Furthermore, "[w]hat appears at the national level to be the key issue—for example, class relations, constitutions, or ethnic secession—may not be salient at the local level" (also see Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2008, p. 547). Hence, as a researcher going into a new field, it is difficult to hold a record of the full array of wartime events let alone an understanding of how each event played out in individual experiences.

Furthermore, in one-on-one interviews, the respondent may also not remember all the critical events or may choose to ignore them, however crucial they are in constructing their perceptions of the war. Each respondent may focus on a different bit of the wartime episodes in their narratives, which renders it hard for the researcher interested in processes to trace the formation of attitudes to wartime events in a systematic fashion. Focus groups can remind people of the common events that were significant at the local level via conversations with peers.

War-Bound Norms and Sensitivities

Another challenge awaiting conflict researchers pertains to language norms. Researchers may not know how to inquire about wartime processes using the appropriate language to avoid

causing offense or emotional harm to participants and understanding the boundaries of norms. Language sensitivities can be as simple as a matter of pronunciation. For example, the way PKK is pronounced has become political in Turkey, and the Turkish pronunciation of PKK can cause offense for most ethnic Kurds.³ Kurdish pronunciation assumes the idea of PKK being a liberating group fighting for Kurdish rights and freedoms, whereas Turkish pronunciation assumes embracing the official Turkish state's discourse which brands PKK as a terrorist group. In order to avoid causing any offense, in provinces that are predominantly Kurdish, I used the Kurdish pronunciation of PKK. Similar to language, norms about what is acceptable to discuss and what is not are essential to be cognizant of prior to fieldwork. As I will explain below, being overly conservative may cost the researcher losing valuable information, while being overly liberal may jeopardize possibility of establishing trust.

In sum, there are a myriad of challenges in gathering retrospective data and in gathering data from conflict contexts, and when two are merged, challenges are even bigger. To alleviate some of these challenges associated with retrospective accounts, focus groups can be employed supplementary to in-depth interviews by the researcher. Focus groups are very instrumental in canvassing a broad range of experiences in a population, as interactive group conversations bring a comprehensive array of opinions, experiences, attitudes, and context-specific incidences to focus. The researcher then can bring up these events as "anchors" in time in the in-depth interviews and use the wartime dynamics brought up in focus groups to gauge their relevance. Focus groups can also help researchers capture linguistic or symbolic sensitivities prior to starting interviews, and researchers can then go into the one-on-one discussions with greater awareness of potential sensitivities. All of these benefits not only will help establish a stronger rapport but will also improve the quality of data gathered.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method that entail having a small group of participants discuss a chosen issue while a moderator guides the discussion (Morgan, 1996; Wibeck et al., 2007). Group interaction is a distinctive feature in focus groups that enables "comprehensive elicitation of individuals' views" and helps researchers observe "the process of collective sense-making" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 186). Hughes and DuMont (2002) have shown how incorporating focus groups into the research program can facilitate culturally anchored research: "In their reliance on social interaction, focus groups can also help researchers identify cultural knowledge that is shared among group members as well as to appreciate the range of different experiences individuals within a group may have" (p. 258). Similarly, Wilkinson (1998, p. 189) posits that "[f]ocus group interactions reveal not only shared ways of talking, but also shared experiences, and shared ways of making sense of these experiences." In contexts with a history of conflict, understanding of the language sensitivities

is one of the most essential parts of culturally anchored research. Focus group discussions provide the researcher with an opportunity to listen to how participants ordinarily talk, what phrases/words they avoid, the relevant concepts the participants use to describe conflicts, and what participants find appropriate.

In my research, I realized the utility of focus groups as soon as I started gathering data and experienced the difficulty with reconstructed accounts firsthand. After I arrived to a subnational field site,⁴ I first conducted a few expert interviews, including government officials, academics, journalists, and nongovernment organization affiliates. To my dismay, elected officials—especially in Turkey (given that the conflict is ongoing)—would often just offer the official state discourse, which suggests that Kurdish rebels are terrorists, and in response to terrorist attacks, the Turkish state counterattacks to protect its borders by “exclusively” targeting the terrorists, without any additional useful input. When I prodded further, they would circumvent the question with a politically correct rhetoric. On the opposite side were the Kurdish experts, and they would repeat the insurgent discourse, which highlights the historical injustices ethnic Kurds endured and the suppression of Kurdish identity, embellishing with the significance of the Kurdish movement. More balanced views were present, but ultimately for understanding the microlevel experiences, experts did not offer much insight.

In Peru, the literature on conflict is vast as the war is long over, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report is a wonderful source for understanding some of the local dynamics of the war, however, limited. The local experts in Peru sometimes would offer a few new perspectives, but many of them were not living in the localities where I interviewed them during the war. Also, because most of the provincial experts (experts based in the provinces other than Lima) I interviewed were recommended to me by researchers in Lima, the provincial experts tended to stand out in terms of their political stance in their locality and their social status (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Because of this, the provincial experts often gravitated conversation toward a politically accepted standardized critical rhetoric, for example, using pejorative terms to describe the former president, Fujimori, who was in power during the peak of civil war. Fujimori fled the country upon revelations of his corrupt practices, and is currently in jail for corruption and human rights violation charges. However, many Peruvians I spoke to in the *Sierra* revered him for ending the civil war violence and considered him as the best president they have ever had. Given that my research was on political attitudes in the face of civil war, these nuances loomed large. Focus groups with a diverse array of Peruvians were, thus, crucial to get a better sense of microlevel processes.

I often started with expert interviews in each subnational field site. Following the expert interviews, I decided to organize focus groups with ordinary residents in each site prior to my interviews and noticed the improvement in the quality of interview data. Observing the natural flow of conversations and

comfort of the participants in sharing a memory and the language allowed me to understand contextual sensitivities. Just as importantly, group interactions enabled a mechanism to validate retrospective accounts, and both challenges and confirmations by the peer participants helped me access a more accurate representation of the wartime events and war-induced dynamics, which I used in restructuring my interview questions. In some occasions, I used focus groups after one-on-one interviews to see whether the personal accounts presented by an individual found resonance with others from the same locality. However, in this article, I focus on the utility of focus groups as a prelude for in-depth interviews with ordinary people.

My sampling strategy for focus groups depended on the volatility of the context, as some are more ethnically divided than others. As is often the case in focus groups, my sample selection was purposive and nonrepresentative. I used geographical and ethnic divisions in my target populations as main criteria and also segregated the groups by gender, age, and socioeconomic status to make sure participants were comfortable speaking about their experiences. I ran adult focus groups (over the age of 25) where I separated men and women, first ethnically homogeneous and then more mixed groups, and mixed-gender youth focus groups (age 18–25) in each city. The average size of the groups was eight people. I kept the size on the smaller side to allow in-depth conversations and to hear a multiplicity of interpretations of wartime events. The conversations were on average 2 hr long.

I moderated almost all the focus groups myself along with a local researcher. As my purpose was to garner as broad a view of the past as possible and understand the intricacies of each locality in terms of the wartime conflicts and experiences, I eschewed being directive or leading and let the conversation flow, with occasional interferences to bring the conversation back to the topic or to moderate contentious debates. In all focus groups, participants were presented with the consent form, and in most cases, verbal consent was received, while a few of them were comfortable signing a print version.

Examples for the Utility of Focus Groups

Focus groups helped me to find out about the pivotal wartime events, dynamics, and their meanings that shaped individuals’ relations with the state and with each other, which are important inputs for political trust formation and interpersonal trust relations. In subnational contexts that were most exposed to violence, participants would produce a list of small-scale wartime attacks by the state forces or insurgents or other wartime events that were impactful in their collective memories throughout the conversations, which were very useful for my research. For example, in Ayacucho, focus groups with adults allowed me to mark the funeral of Edith Lagos, a pro-Sendero activist who was killed by the Peruvian police, as a significant threshold event. Thousands attended the funeral though its footage is hard to access outside of Ayacucho.

Inasmuch as focus groups can be highly instrumental in anchoring the researcher in locally relevant wartime events, here I would like to discuss the less conspicuous uses of focus groups for unearthing subnational variations in understandings of the conflict (e.g., counterhegemonic discourses) and revealing linguistic sensitivities.

In the examples below, I provide excerpts from the focus group conversations among the participants. Participants were numbered in each focus group, where the numbers ranged from 1 to 12. To maintain participants' anonymity, in my publications, I refer to participants by the numbers assigned to them instead of their real names. In addition, I give examples from expert interviews to support my arguments. I also avoid using experts' names and instead refer to experts using the numbers I assigned to them.

The first example pertains to the broad topic of subnational variations of understanding of conflict. One striking instance I encountered with regard to such variations via focus groups was about meanings assigned to wartime casualties in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. In the adult focus group in Diyarbakır, which is the most politically active city of the Kurdish region in Turkey and also de facto headquarters of the Kurdish movement, focus groups brought forth the localized meaning of guerrilla deaths, a common occurrence during the war. In mainstream Turkish media, soldiers are assigned the status of "martyr," stemming from the Islamic tradition and nationalist interpretation of territory in Turkey. Focus group discussions enabled me to grasp that Kurdish rebels were also assigned the status of "martyr" in the Eastern provinces of Turkey, and that it is customary to refer to them as "martyr." The following conversation captures one instance of such a discussion:

Focus Group (FG) 5_Participant (P) #3: The [Turkish] news is so biased. They never call fallen guerrillas [Kurdish rebels] martyr. It is the opposite; guerrillas are "terrorists" for them. [Turkish] Soldiers die for the sake of motherland, and what about guerrillas? They are also after their land, rights, and democracy. Hence, guerrillas are also martyrs, but nobody acknowledges it.

FG5_P#4: But we [ethnic Kurds in Diyarbakır] know. Fallen guerrillas are our martyrs.

FG5_P#1: Well, yes, but there used to be so many caskets of fallen guerrillas that no family owned out of fear. So, even though we know, the state turned people into monster parents who did not want to recognize their children (Adult Male Focus Group in Diyarbakır, June 5, 2014).

I knew that many Kurdish people in the East lent support to the PKK and they respected the guerrillas; yet I was not fully aware of the local norms of calling fallen guerrillas "martyrs." I asked about guerrilla deaths in another subnational field site, which is also predominantly Kurdish, and realized that calling fallen guerrillas "martyr" is not acceptable in every Kurdish village as the norms may be widely different. The excerpt below from a focus group conversation in Şanlıurfa is a good example.

FG 7_P#8: Every mother cries to the loss of her son, whether he fought on the part of the state or the PKK.

FG 7_P#7: That is true but not every casualty [referring to uniformed soldier or rebel casualties] is the same. Some are dignified. A soldier fighting for the country is not in the same basket as a rebel fighting for the terrorists, eh?

FG 7_P#5: I think it is the same. Rebels are also fighting for their country.

FG 7_P#3: Now if we go there, we can't get out. Maybe it is maybe it is not. But can we call them the same? The fellow villagers would never embrace a fallen guerilla as much as they embrace a fallen soldier simply because the soldier is legitimately a martyr. You can't call the guerillas martyr without getting into trouble as guerillas are also perceived as enemies. Many families lost their sons to war here and the people are very nationalist [pro-Turkish state] here (Adult Male Focus Group in Şanlıurfa, May 28, 2014).

Focus groups thus gave me insights into how war losses may be perceived differently and introduced me to localized sensitivities and meanings attached to war casualties. I added the question of how participants viewed guerrilla deaths in my interviews and adjusted my follow-up questions to the initial reactions.

Along similar lines, when expressing their resentment toward the state, participants let me in on some stories that I expected to be a taboo and helped me revise my sense of the norms. For example, I had read and heard from some sources that joining the insurgency as a reaction to state's repression is common. For example, one human rights group leader stated:

Expert#15: People who were detained when they were 15 were sentenced to prison for 17 years [referring to cases of Kurdish kids imprisoned for throwing rocks at the vehicles of the Turkish security forces as an act of protest], and once they were released, they joined the PKK. When the currently imprisoned kids are released, they also will join the PKK because they are harassed, violated, marginalized, suppressed, and even when they are out, the state forces won't leave them alone. [. . .] Rule of law is dead anyway so there is no rescue for these kids. The court of appeal believe that 17 years of prison time is insufficient and raises it to 34 years so that they would never show disrespect to state panzer [military tank]. This is the strategy of the Turkish state. So, they [ex-prisoners] will also join [the PKK] instead (Interview #E15, Male, Diyarbakır, June 9, 2014).

Believing that these instances would frighten the ethnic Kurds, I went into the Kurdish localities with the assumption that participants would be reluctant to talk about their support for the insurgents let alone talking about sending soldiers to the insurgents. This was because the conflict was ongoing, and the Turkish state considers insurgency to be terrorism, and hence, joining the insurgency is defined as a crime. Yet, in most conversations within focus groups in the Kurdish areas, participants casually brought up "going to the mountains" or joining the ranks of the insurgents:

FG4_P#6: Going to the mountains is like accepting death before you even start. Why did those guerrillas go to the mountains in the first place? My friend's son has gone to the mountains 2 years ago because the state gave him 4 years of prison sentence for joining a protest movement. Just because he was holding a banner [in a legal protest].

FG4_P#2: Aargh! Same here. My cousin went to the mountains because he threw rocks at the police and the judge gave him 17 years of prison sentence. How is that reasonable?

FG4_P#5: My uncle's son is the same way. He got arrested because he was a member of a student club [supporting Kurdish rights and freedoms] in his university (Adult Men Focus Group, Şanlıurfa, May 21, 2014).

I added a question in my interviews on this topic in the Kurdish regions, and it ended up being one of the most fruitful questions (see Online Appendix). I should note that I went to Turkey for my fieldwork in 2014, which was an exceptionally peaceful year as armistice was under way. 2014 was also a time when ethnic Kurds felt most free to talk about their identity after the government initiative, known as “the Kurdish opening,” which extended the rights and freedoms granted to Kurds. Previously, talking about Kurds or Kurdishness in general was a taboo, especially in the 1990s. Participants could have acted differently if I went to the field in 2015 instead, a year when Turkey was beset with a renewal of fight with the PKK as well as rise in international terrorism. Fortunate as I was going into the field in 2014 and finding out that participants in focus groups were comfortable to talk about guerilla activity openly, I integrated some sensitive questions to my list.

Once I started asking questions about sympathy for the PKK and interest in joining the ranks, the ex-guerilla fighters, the families of the guerillas, and civil society organizations I interviewed all concur on the argument that the discrimination, violence, and ruthlessness of state propelled many Kurdish youth to join the PKK insurgency as they didn't share any moral grounds with the state to justify it as authority. Their reaction was to rebel and challenge the state's authority. The content of this data helped shaped my theory about war and political trust to a large extent.

Another war-induced dynamic I discovered in focus groups was about intraethnic group distinctions, particularly in ethnically mixed contexts (usually, the ones that attracted displaced populations). I expected ethnicity-based discrimination because the war in Turkey was ethnic in character. Yet the logic and rationale behind the distinction between “good Kurd” and “bad Kurd” was not crystal clear to me.

FG2_P#4: I am not against Kurds in general, I am against those who are in favor of a separate Kurdish state. For instance, I am not against Ahmet [a pseudo name for the Kurdish security guard in their neighborhood the participant is referring to], he is not mean at his heart, unlike others [referring to Kurds who are pro-secessionist or pro-autonomy for the Kurdish region].

FG2_P#5: Me neither! I like that he [Ahmet] does not speak Kurdish much, and I know he is voting for the government, not the Kurdish party (Ankara Women Focus Group, April 9, 2014).

“Good Kurds” are perceived to be docile and are not vocal about their identity or do not embrace their Kurdish identity. Indeed, among the Kurds I talked and from the depictions of “good Kurds” in the accounts of ethnic Turks, I inferred that the “good Kurds” often identify themselves as Turkish citizen and would underplay or even refute their ethnic identity.

In Peru, focus groups were instrumental for me to realize that a similar distinction existed between “good” and “bad” Indigenous peoples, using geographical cues. Those coming from the *sierra*, especially Ayacucho, were strictly labeled as “terrorist,” yet identity-based negative judgments were not extended to other Indigenous peoples.

Focus groups also enabled me to see that within the identity dimension it was not always ethnic identities that shaped interpersonal relations. In metropolitan cities, Istanbul and Lima in my two cases, urban–rural identities were more predominant in the participants' perception of the displaced groups, which instantiates another example of subnational contextual variation. To give an example, in Istanbul, focus group participants expressed being prejudiced against Kurds on the basis of lifestyle and cultural practices that are incompatible with urban living:

FG13_P#3: Some of them [Kurdish migrants] are senseless and stubborn. They came here [to İstanbul] almost two decades ago, yet still haven't learned how to dress or even speak Turkish. They somehow made it and became able to afford a place in a nice neighborhood, yet they do not try to adapt one bit. They are still shaking their tablecloths from the balcony. They put their shoes outside of their apartment. They do not even close their door as if this is some sort of a commune life. It is unconscionable.

FG13_P#7: Exactly! That bothers me, too. They could be good Kurds and may not have a separatist agenda but the fact that they are not willing to adapt [to urban living] is the reason they are considered as a problem here (Mixed Adult Focus Group, İstanbul, June 9, 2014).

Analogous issues were raised in Lima about the Indigenous migrants from Ayacucho. The fact that many participants chimed in and expressed similar sentiments in the focus group denotes that it is an essential dynamic I should probe further. Many Limañeans in the focus groups complained that along with the migration came chaos, and they would depict the *combis* as embodiment of the chaos that they attributed to the arrival of the migrants:

Lima used to be a calm, organized, and a beautiful city. Then came those from the *sierra* in the 1980s, and ever since then chaos has prevailed. They brought in their lifestyles, they are turning this city into a place in the *sierra*. Lima was not meant for this many people. The city got destroyed upon the arrival of the *cholo*⁵ crowd. [...] Why are they not in their *pueblo* [village], why did they come here? Lima had terrorism, too. We went through hell as well. Now the terrorism is long over, yet they are still here (#17, Female, Lima, September 30, 2013).

In developing my theory, such additional dimensions of identity contentions were important. In the cases I studied, the

war not only increased the salience of identities but also engendered new social categorizations as a by-product of forced displacement such as the “good” and “bad” Kurds or rural migrants in urban settings. Conversations in focus groups revealed these kinds of new identities and intergroup dynamics that are endogenous to the war, as participants naturally shared their personal experiences, opinions, observations, and sufferings. With focus groups, researchers new to the field can learn a great deal about the mechanisms and cognitive processes of individuals who lived in a conflict setting. A well-formed group, where participants feel safe to share, as opposed to a contentious one (e.g., a group with a mix of clashing social identities), is all the more conducive to produce this sort of valuable data, which can be useful in other stages of research as well. For example, having discovered these dimensions via focus groups, I incorporated new questions in my interview guide to ask about the new urban dynamics following waves of internal displacement and to find out about collateral effects of the war (see Online Appendix).⁶ Starting my qualitative research with focus groups was very helpful in finding out such dynamics.

Conclusion

This article shows why and how focus groups can be instrumental in conflict research, especially when researchers are interested in wartime processes and retrospective accounts. Focus groups can serve as a prelude to in-depth interviews, to help researchers crystallize their questions, and to instruct them with respect to localized sensitivities and culturally anchored meanings of conflict. Observing the flow of collective meaning-making in-group interactions enables the researcher to get a sense of the prevalent and shared conceptualizations of the war, as well as shared experiences, perceptions, and convictions. After repeated focus groups with diverse participants, the researchers can take notice of the distinction between narratives filled with official war narratives by the state versus more personalized accounts about the war reflecting idiosyncrasies, which aids in formulating interview questions to access a more reliable version of past memories and more accurate accounts.

Focus groups are also effective tools for exploring mechanisms of change in conflict contexts. In my research on consequences of intrastate wars on trust, conversations in focus groups shed light on identity shifts and transformations in the face of the war, a detail that proved to be very instrumental in my theory on how war shapes trust relations.

This article mostly focused on the use of focus groups as a prelude to interviews. Focus groups can also be used as a follow-up to one-on-one interviews to gauge how the narratives gathered from personal accounts hold up in a larger group or to see how much more there is to learn, that is, to estimate the saturation point for the interviews. Given this versatility in the contributions focus groups can make to enrich research in conflict context, researchers should take advantage of this tool.

Author's Note

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. One example from Turkey would be the official discourse around the Sheikh Said and Dersim revolts in 1920s, which were the two major reactions against the early republic, which embraced more modern and secular values over traditional and religious ones, values that were the prevalent values up until then. Both rebellions were suppressed by violent crackdowns by the Turkish military. The hegemonic official state narrative has portrayed these brutal military crackdowns as justified responses to rebellions by degenerate, feudal social forces. Alternative historiographical accounts, however, depict the violent crackdowns as extreme violence perpetrated by the state security forces toward its citizens who were protesting repressive policies.
2. I define discourse here as a “social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify” (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, pp. 3–4). Official discourses of a party involved in a conflict usually aim to delegitimize the other party (or parties) while justifying their own actions. These discourses serve as a frame of reference for the public and play major roles in threat framing and opinion formation.
3. The way letter “k” is pronounced in Turkish and Kurdish is different; the Kurdish pronunciation reads the letter “k” as “kay,” while the Turkish pronunciation reads it as “ka” (as in “karate”).
4. My subnational field sites were selected in accordance with criteria such as exposure to violence, ethnic composition of the locality,

and percentage of displaced population. I chose subnational sites in each country: Ankara, İstanbul, Mersin, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep in Turkey, and Lima, Ayacucho, Arequipa, Cajamarca, Cusco, Tarapoto, and Iquitos in Peru.

5. In the Peruvian contexts, “cholo” refers to people of Indigenous ancestry who is acculturated to a mestizo lifestyle (Larson, 2004).
6. The questions that were added after focus group conversations are underlined.

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