Using a three-stage focus group design to develop questionnaire items for a mass survey on corruption and austerity: a roadmap

Focus groups
on corruption
and austerity

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Abstract

Purpose – This article presents focus groups as a method to enhance questionnaire design to frame and test items for a mass survey on corruption and austerity in democracy. Such methodology lacks systematization when it comes to the description of implementation procedures and the discussion of effective contribution to the development of survey questions on sensitive topics. The objective of this article is to contribute to the specialized literature on corruption by offering a novel focus group approach and a roadmap to guide researchers in the field when using this methodology to develop questionnaire items. This hands-on guide can be adaptable to other (survey) studies on issues prone to social desirability bias.

Design/methodology/approach – This article proposes an innovative multi-technique (short questionnaire, visual stimuli and exploratory discussion with expert moderation) focus group approach to collect informal impressions about corruption and austerity. By developing a focus group design through the combination of different research techniques, the authors were able to triangulate reflexive, spontaneous and interactive qualitative bottom-up information about individual perceptions and reactions to sensitive topics. By describing how to implement these groups, other than discussing what type of qualitative information can be extracted from these discussions and to what effect, the authors seek to present a hands-on guide that can be replicated and adapted to similar studies. This roadmap will help researchers to test individual perceptions and reactions to sensitive topics through the use of tailored focus groups in order to enhance the quality of survey questionnaires prior to engaging in a high-cost fieldwork.

Findings – The article concludes that the adoption of the multi-technique focus group approach to requalify and test questions for a nationwide survey gives us a better understanding of the many ethical dilemmas individuals confront when thinking about and expressing their views on sensitive topics prone to social desirability bias. The proposed multi-technique focus group approach proved to be effective to engage participants during sessions and to obtain relevant and unanticipated information for the development of new questionnaire items and the reviewing of old ones.

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Research limitations/implications – Implementing Focus Group (FG) in regions with different cultural traditions and levels of development and contrasting the perceptions, values and attitudes of two generations, with different formative backgrounds is not an easy task. In order to secure the adequate number and type of participants, the Focus Group were organized in close collaboration with four higher education institutions and two lifelong learning programs where the sessions took place. Participation was voluntary and consented, in accordance with the applicable legislation and standards for social research.

Practical implications – The article presents an accessible and adaptable roadmap to researchers working in the field of corruption studies as well as anticorruption government agencies and CSOs interested in enhancing the quality of survey questionnaires on sensitive topics target of social desirability before engaging in a high-cost fieldwork and to describe relevant information that can be extracted from the discussions held.

Social implications – Most cross-country surveys on corruption tend to use basic/traditional measures to assess the phenomenon, such as questions on extension, acceptability and/or experience. They take almost for granted that people have the same understanding of this complex construct, which may not hold true, as the focus group discussions illustrate. The three-stage focus group design aims to improve the quality of a survey design regarding people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of corruption in democracy, by contributing to the development of new questions that tap into the relationship between social condemnation and the individual's socio-economic conditions.

Originality/value – The article provides a low-cost combination of qualitative-oriented (questionnaire development through focus groups) with a quantitative-oriented research tool (mass survey implementation) to meet mixed-method research objectives and enhance the ability to capture several “non-statistical” dimensions of complex social phenomena that are often neglected when a single-methodology approach is used.

Keywords Focus groups, Survey design, Implementation roadmap, Qualitative methods, Multi-methods, Multi-techniques, Corruption, Sensitive issues

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The use of qualitative methods, in particular focus groups, to frame and test survey items that address *sensitive issues* (Condomines and Hennequin, 2014) such as corruption has become increasingly popular in social sciences (Krause, 2002; Morgan, 1988; Parker and Tritter, 2006; Ricci *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, there are four possible ways to combine focus groups and surveys depending “on which method received the primary attention and whether the secondary method served as a preliminary or follow-up study” (Morgan, 1993, 1996, p. 134).

This study relies on survey as primary method and focus groups as a preliminary study. Corruption-related surveys have been reduced to a panoply of quantitative-oriented results that often leave no room to discuss idiosyncrasies related to individual behaviors and reactions on sensitive issues (Laurie and Sullivan, 1991) and therefore require an in-depth analysis of what they are trying to measure (Torsello and Venard, 2016; Wysmulek, 2019). So, dedicating time to develop and apply a roadmap to implement focus groups before running a mass survey is a prudent and sound methodological strategy in so far it adds a qualitative and critical interpretation of existing survey items that are repeatedly thrown at the general public without questioning their capacity to capture different gradients of opinion. It also enables the discussion and probable insertion of new questions covering unanticipated dimensions of the phenomenon. Such a methodological strategy is recommendable since it helps to identify and address issues relevant to the country-level study and to detect and prevent risks or problems that may compromise the quality of its results prior to engage in the fieldwork.

This article provides a hands-on guide for questionnaire development that can be useful to inform a broader audience interested in enhancing the quality of survey items through the evaluation of bottom-up information on individual understandings of sensitive issues prone to social desirability bias and to detect and address question incongruences and gaps before survey implementation.

The combination of qualitative-oriented (questionnaire development through focus groups) with a quantitative-oriented research tool (mass survey implementation) is a low-cost attempt to enhance subsequent triangulation of findings, to improve methodological reliability and, therefore, the ability to capture several “non-statistical” dimensions of the phenomenon that are often neglected when a single-methodology approach is used. Although

the methodological literature recommends a mixed-method approach (e.g. [Datta, 1997](#); [Condomines and Hennequin, 2014](#)), relatively few explain how focus groups can be used to better develop quantitative survey items ([Morgan, 1993](#); [Nassar-McMillan *et al.*, 2010](#); [Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002](#); [O'Brien, 1993](#)).

Since qualitative research is adaptable and creative, social scientists can capitalize on the use of a variety of tools for designing focus groups to explore sensitive topics ([Zeller, 1993](#)). Following [Morgan's \(1988, 1993\)](#) advice that focus groups can provide very useful insights for surveys and ratifying [Brannen's \(1992\)](#) interest for the potential of multi-methods, this article proposes an innovative multi-technique focus group approach to collect informal impressions on corruption and austerity that may be of interest for future research. As [Taylor and Coffey \(2008, p. 13\)](#) simply put it, innovation in qualitative research methods “can be as much as about practice as design – thus embracing tried and tested methods”.

In this line, we carry out an in-depth discussion of an innovating three-stage focus group design based on the adaptation and articulation of three data collection techniques: (1) short questionnaires (Stage 1); (2) visual stimuli (Stage 2) and (3) exploratory discussions, with expert moderation, on corruption (process-oriented factor) and austerity (outcome-oriented factor) (Stage 3). This three-stage focus group design combines reflexive and spontaneous (individual level) with interactive (group level) qualitative data collection techniques that complement each other.

The article is organized in six parts. We start by reviewing corruption-related studies that adopt a focus group approach to find that there is still room for a more detailed systematization of the procedures needed to successfully implement those groups in order to better inform the design of survey questionnaires. With this gap in the literature in mind, we present our mixed-method research objectives and discuss the role played by focus groups in this approach. Next, we discuss three methodological procedures to be taken into consideration before effectively running focus groups. Then, we provide a hands-on implementation guideline based on these methodological procedures to ensure fieldwork quality and consistency and to meet our mixed-method research objectives. Finally, we report on the major inputs of our three-stage focus groups to improve the contents of our mass survey questionnaire. We conclude by suggesting that the discussion of sensitive topics with informed audiences in a focus group format helps survey developers to fine tune previous questionnaire items and add new ones; and, that in order to be successful in doing so, some prior investment should be made to think about innovative ways of combining multiple research techniques to extract qualitative bottom-up information.

2. What is missing in the specialized literature?

The use of focus groups to study corruption is relatively recent and lacks systematization. It is worth mentioning that such methodology has been mainly used to validate findings from surveys and other quantitative methods ([Avkiran *et al.*, 2016](#); [Buttle *et al.*, 2016](#); [Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2011](#); [Grødeland, 2013](#); [Liu *et al.*, 2017](#); [Masters and Graycar, 2016](#); [Milojević and Krstić, 2018](#); [Redlawsk and McCann, 2005](#); [Sadigov, 2018](#)). Few studies have used focus group to inform corruption survey designs.

[Ferreira *et al.* \(2012\)](#) used focus groups before running a survey on corruption in Brazil, but no explanation was given as to how these were implemented or which contributions they effectively added to the final version of the questionnaire. [Walton \(2015\)](#) in Papua New Guinea, [Johannsen *et al.* \(2016\)](#) in Denmark and Estonia and [Burduja and Zaharia \(2019\)](#) in Romania conceived focus groups to develop conceptual dimensions of corruption which were then transposed to the survey questionnaires. They actually discussed effective focus group inputs but did not describe implementation steps taken to obtain them.

Because “corruption” is a volatile and contested social construct ([Andersson and Heywood 2009](#)), when it comes to the development of questionnaire items for mass surveys, most cross-country efforts have used primarily a minimalist definition of corruption: the

abuse of entrusted power for private benefit. If we want to capture a more nuanced picture of corruption, this definition is ill-suited. More recently, country surveys have tried to use scenarios to assess what falls under the label of corruption (Allen and Birch, 2015; ICAC, 2006). Focus groups enable researchers to explore different conceptual dimensions of corruption which can then be developed into concrete survey items. Therefore, it is important to design focus group in a way that enables researchers to capture these different gradients of the phenomenon and a protocol that systematizes how focus groups should be implemented.

Having identified this gap in the literature, we decided to dedicate some time to reflect not only on *what* type of information we could obtain from focus groups (to inform our survey design), but *how* this information could be obtained in a systematized manner. Our article makes a contribution to the specialized literature by presenting a roadmap on how to develop and implement multi-technique focus groups to frame and test questionnaire items for surveys on sensitive social topics, such as corruption and austerity. In the same line as Krause (2002), our ultimate publication goal is to provide “practical, hands-on advice for bridging the two methodological approaches”.

3. Research objectives and the role played by focus groups in a corruption-related mass survey questionnaire design

The current focus group methodology was conceived as a fundamental part of a six-step strategy developed to improve the quality of the questionnaire design of a survey study on people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of corruption and austerity in democracy. Each step is now described to put this strategy into context.

Step 1 is the development of a systematic literature review of perception-based definitions and measurements of corruption. Step 2 is the creation of a database of major cross-country and national survey questions on corruption to benchmark high-quality (and innovative) items and available scales. Step 3 is the reassessment of the questionnaire applied in a previous survey study on ethics and corruption to identify core items to be tested in focus groups and replicated in the new survey as well as items to be reviewed. Step 4 is the development and implementation of focus groups to frame and test questionnaire items on corruption and austerity in democracy. Step 5 is the discussion of focus group findings and insights with our research team and guest experts in the field to get their input on formal and substantive aspects related to the improvement of questions to be incorporated into the survey questionnaire – reliability, theoretical validity, wording, suitable and proper response options/scales; order of presentation; etc. Finally, Step 6 is the traditional pre-test of the mass survey questionnaire in close collaboration with the polling agency during the first set of interviews to flag up difficulties in interpreting questions and response options/scales, to adjust survey's completion time, etc.

Figure 1 summarizes the above-mentioned strategic steps and highlights our core objective: to explore the relevance of the focus group approach to make quantitative-oriented surveys incorporate non-trivial qualitative dimensions of corruption (Step 4).

Focus groups, although instrumental, assumed a central role in this survey design strategy. They bridged inferences from different sources: structured literature review; survey benchmarking; review of past survey rounds – when available – and discussions on the structure and adequacy of the survey questionnaire, conducted by project managers and polling specialists. In other words, focus groups can be designed and used to break cyclical research bias by adding out-of-the-box solutions to recurrent questionnaire problems detected before effectively running the mass survey.

Because focus groups encouraged participants to think and talk freely about a given topic – in a manner that could not be captured in a regular quantitative survey – they allowed us to consider new survey items without feeling constrained by what has been done so far.

In the specific case of corruption-related studies, most cross-country surveys tend to use basic/traditional measures to assess the phenomenon, e.g. questions on extension,

Figure 1.
A six-step survey
design strategy

acceptability and/or experience (Wysmulek, 2019). They take almost for granted that people have the same understanding of this complex construct, which may not hold true, as our focus group discussion illustrate.

4. Methodological procedures: concerns prior to focus group implementation

In this section, we discuss three methodological procedures to be taken into consideration before effectively running focus groups: (1) the focus groups approach adopted; (2) the focus groups' composition and recruitment strategy, i.e. sampling adequacy and (3) the focus group design with a reference to the materials presented to participants during the meetings.

4.1 *The decision on focus group adequacy: combining “saturation” and “funnel” approaches*

Two key approaches have been commonly used when preparing qualitative data collection through focus groups: the saturation point (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the funnel (Morgan, 1988) approaches. The saturation approach relies on a procedure in which group discussion endures until participants present no new information or thoughts about the subject of interest, i.e. until discussion reaches a “thematic data saturation point” (Bowen, 2008). A major shortcoming of this approach is the fact that there are no clear boundaries or guidelines to decide when and how thematic data saturation is reached (Francis *et al.*, 2010; O'Reilly and Parker, 2013).

Since we conducted thematic (corruption-austerity) focus groups using the same data collection procedures, we expected to obtain thorough results. However, it would be difficult to set a precise point of saturation to be replicated in all groups beforehand. Corruption is a social concept without a consensus on its core attributes/properties (Rose, 2018), which makes saturation alone not suitable to explore idiosyncrasies that lie beyond the natural boundaries of social norms.

On the other hand, the funnel approach makes focus group interactions go “broader at the top and narrower at the bottom”, meaning that discussions on the core subject start at a higher level of abstraction and end in more detailed specifications of the phenomenon. The main drawback associated with the implementation of such approach when assessing corruption-related issues is the fact that a general discussion on sensitive topics at an earlier stage may standardize conceptualization and ignore whether a broad consensus on the

subject existed or not. Again, funnel alone does not meet the requirements to give room for unintended consequences of individual interpretations of corruption.

To mitigate this problem both approaches were combined, assuming that together they could provide benefits to focus group discussions. We started with a catch-all question that expressed conceptual concerns (“What is corruption?”) to make the discussion more fluid and natural (as suggested by the saturation approach) but guided by a focus group script and expert moderation to narrow down the discussion (as prompted by the funnel approach).

4.2 The decision on sampling adequacy: choosing an “easy-to-manipulate” accepted effect to boost debate on individual and group idiosyncrasies related to corruption-related topics

The main purpose of the focus group strategy presented here was to capture several subjective dimensions of corruption in order to inform a large-N survey questionnaire. To succeed in this endeavor and considering that time consuming strategies cannot be pursued during mass survey implementation, a purposive sampling, i.e. “selecting information-rich cases for study in depth [...] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

We have chosen a “purposive sampling technique” to deliberately select participants that due to a specific set of attributes they possess are more or less prone to justify corruption. The methodological literature suggests that purposive sampling often involves selecting “individuals or groups of individuals that are proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest” (Etikan *et al.*, 2016) and capable of articulating opinions in a thoughtful manner.

The analysis of the resulting material gathered during Steps 1 and 2 of the mass survey design strategy (presented in Section 3) were crucial to find evidence (in existing peer reviewed literature and past survey projects) to choose what to easily manipulate (in this specific case) to maximize perception variability. Age appeared as key to structure focus groups about corruption-related aspects, since previous research has already found that young people has higher probability to justify corruption (Gatti *et al.*, 2003; Hunady, 2017; Lavena, 2013; Malmberg, 2019; Pop, 2012; Torgler and Valev, 2006) and relevant cross-national barometers in the field refer that there is a strong relation between age and perceptions of corruption (European Commission, 2017, 2020; European Values Study, 2019).

Due to the pre-existing “age effect” on corruption, focus groups were structured along three dimensions of variability (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p. 235) to increase maximum variation (Heterogeneity) among groups (Suri, 2011, pp. 67–68): (1) “formative”, targeting both academic and life experience learning; (2) “generational”, focusing on two different age cohorts exposed to periods of austerity and (3) “geographical”, considering the social context in which participants live and frame their understandings of corruption and austerity inside democracy.

Regarding “formative” and “generational” dimensions, we sought to reach out to young and senior informed participants that may present a more elaborate and less *vox populi* reflection on the core subject. The idea was to obtain reasoned normative- and experience-based opinions from two different age cohorts and from different theoretical perspectives and academic traditions. Thus, four focus groups were run with young finalist undergraduate students in law, economics, political science and public management and administration from different public higher education institutions. Two additional focus groups were organized with senior individuals with lifelong professional experience and expertise in confronting and dealing with ethical dilemmas inside organizational contexts. Hence, they may have a more pragmatic perspective of what standards should govern an office of entrusted authority in comparison to the young cohort.

In terms of “geographical” spread, five meetings were carried out in large cities in different parts of the country; and one was implemented in a small rural town. As already mentioned, this strategy was adopted to ensure that contrasting cultural settings were represented in the narratives explored to test how corruption-related topics can be targeted to different audiences.

4.3 The decision on focus groups design: presenting the materials that guided interventions

Focus groups were structured in a three-stage multi-technique perspective. From complementary starting points, materials to be presented during all meetings met the following sequence and structure to assess qualitative information provided by participants [1]: application of a short questionnaire on ethics and corruption in democracy (Stage 1); presentation of visual stimuli material related to corruption and/or austerity (Stage 2) and an open-ended discussion based on pre-defined premises related to the corruption-austerity interaction (Stage 3).

Stage 1 consisted of a four-item questionnaire [2]. This form was handed-out in an envelope to all participants at the beginning of each session. The idea was to assess the existing degree of consistency when using key normative concepts associated with public discourses of corruption and to prompt participants to think individually on the macro-relationship between corruption and democracy, prior to sharing and being exposed to the views, judgments and experiences of others.

Question 1 (Q1) was about “meanings of democracy”. It was structured to make participants express their understandings of democracy. Depending on the meanings they valued most, sensitivity to the adverse effects of corruption on democratic performance may emerge spontaneously. Question 2 (Q2) dealt with the ethical principles that participants tend to associate with democracy. The intention was to scan which values were linked to democratic performance and how they might be at stake when related to damages of corruption on democratic norms (Warren, 2004, p. 332). Question 3 (Q3) asked participants to match a set of basic ethical principles in public life to their corresponding standard definition – as usually prescribed by codes of conduct and other deontological legal texts. It was made to verify whether there was a shared understanding regarding those principles and a common ground for group discussion and interaction or not. Finally, Question 4 (Q4) asked participants to specify their level of (dis)agreement with the functionalist belief that such abstract principles may be ignored in order to enable economic growth and that corruption may be regarded as a normal feature of politics in democracy.

Asking participants to fill in a questionnaire – which took about 10–15 min to complete – encouraged them to be reflexive and critical about corruption and its intrinsic social complexity without digressing into outright moral indignation and extremism (Sussman *et al.*, 1991). This procedure was replicated in all focus groups and worked as a sort of “reliability” test for the next stages, since it established a baseline for individual understandings and associations regarding the concepts of corruption and democracy (through its disputable meanings that may lead to economic downturn), respectively. This questionnaire acceded to participants’ cognitive association between corruption, ethics and democracy and prepared them to focus their further participation on this framework.

In Stage 2, participants were asked to react to visual stimuli material available in an additional envelope distributed together with the Stage 1 four-item questionnaire. This stage was meant to prime an indirect association between the topic of corruption and such economic downturn/austerity. This is the most innovative element of the three-stage focus group design.

Although market research and social psychology are familiar with this type of priming technique, this is not the case for corruption-related studies. Focus groups in this field rely primarily on pure discussion of interview questions. Morgan *et al.* (2008) recommend the introduction of more stimulus materials – e.g. pictures, vignettes and stories – as a basis for follow-up group discussion. These stimuli are meant to act as visual metaphors, i.e. real-life images that are regarded in the eye of the beholder as representative of participants’ cognitive representations and associations between social objects without guiding the content of their response. In this sense, such material can be used to enhance participant’s spontaneous social interpretation and concept-framing (Nind and Vinha,

2016, p. 15), especially those topics that deal with sensitiveness or that do not gather social consensus over its meaning.

Stimulus material included four images associated with two visual metaphors. (1) Two illustrations of national individual actors from both public and private sectors suggesting a link to the topic of corruption (Metaphor 1). Two well-known personalities were chosen to this end: a former leading politician and a former banker, since they were both officially charged with corruption and related criminal offenses within the scope of the same criminal investigation. (2) Two illustrations of foreign actors suggesting a link to the topic of “austerity” in democracy (Metaphor 2): a well-known international financial institution logo, i.e. the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) and Germany’s Chancellor, the eurozone’s paymaster. These were two prominent players during Europe’s bailout negotiation and implementation during the last years. Participants were oriented to write down up to three words that better described first thoughts, feelings and/or impressions that came to their mind when visualizing those four images.

Introducing these images as visual metaphors of corruption and austerity was a way to purposely generate stimuli for the follow-up group discussion, as described by [Morgan et al. \(2008\)](#). Sharing visual stimuli not only brought emotion into the discussion, it made following debates more focused too, as it approached the *problématique* in a non-verbal perspective, therefore, efficiently avoiding digressions into other entry points to the subject during the next stage.

Stage 3 consisted of an open discussion around the project’s core subjects, i.e. the relationship between corruption and austerity in democracy. A short script with eight open-ended questions – that dealt with a series of corruption-related issues pertinent to the subsequent mass survey to be conducted – was then conceived to ensure consistency across focus groups. It guided debates and fomented rich interventions during the meetings.

From different viewpoints, participants were encouraged first to answer about what they thought corruption was, about what types of conduct fitted or not into the corruption label. Next, ethical dilemmas were used to elicit additional information on acceptability of certain forms of corruption, which redirected the discussion to moral malleability and unethical conduct rationalization. The discussion was concluded preferably with a reflection on reasons for not reporting corruption and not sanctioning unethical conduct at the ballot box.

This innovative three-stage multi-technique focus group design proved to be instructive on three grounds: (1) notwithstanding focus group recruitment was based on voluntary non-monetary participation, no dropout during focus group discussion was registered; (2) after stages 1 and 2, participants were highly motivated to start the group discussion, from different entry points and kept engaged until the end of the exercise and (3) none of the meetings ended up in disrespect and/or accusation or had to be intentionally interrupted, which is something remarkable, since debates dealt with the issue of corruption, a controversial topic deemed to cause anxiety and sometimes anger ([Birch et al., 2017](#)).

This non-conventional focus group structure becomes in fact a process in which two activities (stages 1 and 2) that required higher levels of concentration made subsequent open-ended debates succeed in terms of engagement and evidenced interest of participants. To summarize: questionnaire distribution and visual stimuli together reduced digression into other topics, then concentration was boosted through an active learning tool, engaged debates. Overall, this strategy is closely related to what has been prescribed by psychology in education ([Burke and Ray, 2008](#); [Sörqvist and Marsh, 2015](#); [Stuart and Rutherford, 1978](#)) but adds a relevant contribution that can be further investigated: it resulted quite well to be implemented with a sensitive topic, such as corruption.

5. Focus group implementation

An implementation protocol based on the methodological procedures presented in the previous section (Table 1) was adopted to ensure fieldwork quality and consistency. This was made possible only after sending all materials to be discussed, evaluated and fully approved by the respective faculty's ethics committee. Actions were in total accordance with all applicable legislation and standards for social research, before any activity starts.

Focus groups were implemented in close collaboration with all host education institutions where sessions took place. Participation was voluntary and consented and the exercises were somehow integrated to ongoing curricular activities to reduce the effects of unexpected time incompatibility. It was possible to secure similar participation rates across groups (≈ 9 to 13 individuals per meeting), thus conforming to an acceptable average size (Adler and Clark, 2008; Morgan, 1988).

To tap on "interpersonal communication" (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299), "group interaction" (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p. 235) and/or "synergistic group effect" (Stewart and Shandasani, 1990), during implementation, a larger number of groups diverse in terms of age, academic background and cultural geographic settings, proved to catalyze discussion as expected. Altogether, 66 participants enrolled in the exercise. Each focus group lasted on total 90 min, being not less than 60 min dedicated to open discussion, so meaningful inputs came from almost all participants. The presence of a moderator with prior experience with class ministration was the key to make debates less concentrated in specific individuals.

Once consent forms were collected and signed, short questionnaires (Stage 1) were distributed. After Stage 1 completion, visual stimuli materials (Stage 2) were also distributed. It is worth mentioning that those Stage 1 and Stage 2 materials were delivered inside

Subjects

- (1) Purposive sampling to assure higher levels of perception variability under time constraints
- (2) Young and senior participants, since it met intended variability between groups
- (3) Prior academic background in fields that study corruption issues (law, economics, political science and public administration) or lifelong experience in dealing with ethical issues
- (4) Geographical and cultural diversity across groups. Exercise ran in different parts of the country
- (5) A number of approximately 9–13 participants per group to assure engaged discussion

Environment

- (1) Regular school/university classroom (integrated in curricular programmes or routines)
- (2) Dispose seats in roundtable format
- (3) Tape record discussion (with informed consent) and invite preferably two assistants to take notes, impressions and help during implementation (to enrich subsequent mass survey questionnaire development)
- (4) Provide an environment of transparency and reinforce anonymity and ethical matters

Moderator

- (1) Guarantee moderator has prior experience in group discussions
- (2) Use a guide/protocol with clear rules of engagement
- (3) Follow an (open-ended) script to steer discussion
- (4) Engage in fluid coordination with assistants/rapporteurs
- (5) Secure conditions for a comfortable and open-minded discussion

Analysis and Report

- (1) Transcribe discussion and collect all introductory close-ended questionnaires and visual stimuli priming materials in a way to guarantee anonymity, while guaranteeing that both questionnaires and visual stimuli came from the same participant
- (2) Analyze systematically all answers to close-ended questions and open-ended narratives
- (3) Report and discuss findings in a way to explore mixed-method potential

Source(s): Adapted from Krueger (2002)

Table 1.
Focus group
implementation
protocol

unmarked and unsigned envelopes to be completed and returned together to the moderator or assistants.

Moderator started the open discussion (Stage 3) with a general question and followed, as much as possible, the list of items available in the script found in [Appendix 1](#). Assistants acted as rapporteurs, taking notes during discussion and conveying to moderator issues that needed further clarification or did not reach the saturation point. They also collected significant non-verbal facial expressions and behaviors that could not be captured by audio recording. This was particularly relevant during Stage 2, when participants were confronted with visual stimuli and evidenced group reactions – both individual (smiles, low-tone laughs, eye-popping and deep-breathing, attentive look searching for group confirmation) and/or collective (emotive and cognitive interjections, jokes and sarcastic/ironic comments spoke aloud) – created an environment of group synergy that helped moderator to kick off Stage 3 debate with perceived high levels of concentration, engagement and interest in the topic.

6. After implementation: evidenced inputs to the mass survey design

This section discusses effective focus group inputs to the mass survey questionnaire on corruption and austerity at stake. The three-stage multi-technique perspective proved to be of relevance for the development of the contents for this nationwide study, since it added non-trivial qualitative-oriented insights to the subsequent Step 5 of the six-step survey design strategy adopted ([Section 3](#)). At the end, the proposed focus group methodology was central for reviewing questions and scales of response from previous surveys on the subject as well as considering new ones.

The short questionnaire introduced to the participants on Stage 1 enabled us to test an updated version of the question on values associated with democratic performance (Q2) used in a previous mass survey. The idea was to check if the list of values presented to participants – which was based on scholarly notions of democratic performance – was meaningful to them when discussing about the way their democracy works. After confronting Stage 1 questionnaire results with assistants' notes, it was clear that a review was necessary. Thus, in this case, the previous scale of responses was revalidated by qualitative focus groups findings. While none of the new values added to the questionnaire on Stage 1 emerged as prominent during Stage 3 group discussions, "honesty" popped up as an unanticipated value to be of relevance when running the mass survey.

Next, a question on the reasons why people decide not to report corruption – which is integral part of the script for open discussion about corruption available in [Appendix 1](#) and similar to what has been asked in past surveys on the subject – was put to the test. The major input to this stemmed from Stage 3 group discussion. Cross-national surveys have been framing such question in general terms, i.e. for the whole population, without taking into account organizational contexts where deviant conducts/practices take place. Open debates could contextualize different reasons for not reporting corruption through the lenses of individual professional experience and/or employment status. The scale used to assess corruption reporting in the previous survey round did not include reputational damages, empathy toward the wrongdoer in an organizational context and rational cost-benefit calculations for not reporting corruption. All these reasons were voiced during Stage 3 focus group discussions and enabled us to reframe the final scale of response of the mass survey questionnaire. Overall, narratives and dialogs proved to change the direction of what has been replicated in terms of corruption reporting by simply paying attention to how focus group participants shared their experiences and opinions with their peers.

Stage 3 group discussion was also crucial to review the issue of electoral punishment of corruption. Although participants agreed in general with possible reasons to vote for corrupt candidates presented by the moderator, they signaled "political orientation" as a major

determinant for not “throwing the rascals out”. There was a shared opinion among focus group participants that voters tended to be more lenient toward corruption scandals involving their preferred party or candidate.

Stage 2 psychological image priming did not constitute a formal experiment *per se* but was effective as a mechanism to make participants move from cognitive representations about corruption (Stage 1) to qualitatively different representations (between groups) but with the guarantee of some intragroup consensual perceptions of corruption, provided by intragroup similarities regarding age and professional area and paved by open-ended debate (Stage 3). Visual metaphors allowed for the cognitive accessibility of participants’ mental representations of corruption and austerity, which prompted them to answer to two questions central to our research project: “What people perceive as corruption?” and “Are perceptions of corruption related to austerity?” Based on the evaluation of this psychological exercise, a new qualitative open question assessing corruption in the eye of the beholder without any filters was inserted into the mass survey. Thus, survey respondents will be asked to express what terms they associate with corruption spontaneously before being confronted with a set of contextualized scenarios that aim to capture a more nuanced social definition of corruption. Traditionally, mass surveys on corruption do not give room for qualitative answers about corruption meanings/attributes, while asking individuals about the consequences of a phenomenon which means different things to different people. After experiencing major narrative idiosyncrasy and such diverse perspectives regarding corruption, we felt the need to insert a question that gives citizens the opportunity to voice freely and openly their understanding of what corruption is. We believe this will have a positive effect on survey participation and commitment, similar to what happened during the focus group discussions.

In short, these multi-technique focus groups were information-rich and gave us a better understanding of the various ethical dilemmas that people confront when thinking about and expressing their views on sensitive topics, such as corruption and austerity. By doing so, we end-up corroborating and expanding the literature that describes focus groups as an effective method to provide useful insights for survey questionnaire development (Krause, 2002; Morgan, 1988, 1993, 1996; O’Brien, 1993; Parker and Tritter, 2006; Ricci *et al.*, 2019).

7. Conclusion

We presented an accessible and adaptable roadmap to researchers working in the field as well as anticorruption government agencies and civil society organizations interested in enhancing the quality of survey questionnaires on sensitive topics prone to social desirability bias before engaging in high-cost fieldwork.

In pursuing this objective, this non-conventional three-stage focus group design proved to be effective in terms of providing relevant qualitative contribution in a fast and low-cost manner. This methodology facilitated the triangulation of reflexive and spontaneous individual expressions (non-contaminated by group discussion) and interactive (group) perceptions of corruption and austerity, highlighting the importance of the qualitative approach not only to advance new research questions but to offer solutions for what quantitative-oriented nationwide surveys are unable to describe (Wisdom and Creswell, 2013).

Listening to participants’ opinion and views, judgments and “stories” about corruption situations, revealed to be a very helpful *modus operandi* to identify issues that were overlooked even by experienced practitioners and academic researchers. Future projects may benefit from the experience gained through the systematization of procedures and implementation described here. Surveys with similar interests (dealing with sensitive topics) can replicate our multi-technique focus group design to explore non-trivial qualitative

implications that may simplify, change, or enhance pre-conceived interpretations associated to complex social phenomena. The exploratory character of Stage 1 and the priming induction of Stage 2 stimulated participants to commit with group discussion (Stage 3) with great efficacy and more than expected *a priori*.

Albeit not central to this article, observable differences across the various groups or related to the young and senior divide, provided interesting insights for further exploratory correlational analysis. Additionally, we encourage future research to make use of this methodology in order to better describe the so-called “cultural” differentiation associated to the explanation of corruption and its consequent acceptability that has been damaging the quality of democracy. Independently of informing survey questions or not, this multi-technique focus group design can still be very useful to access different representations of socially sensitive, complex and hard to define concepts and to understand how these perceptions differ across social groups.

Notes

1. For dissemination purposes, all materials were translated to English and are attached to this article (Appendix 1).
2. Simplified versions of these questions are presented here. (Q1) *The term “democracy” can take on several meanings for different people. From the following list, what is, in your opinion, the most important meaning of democracy and the second most important?* (Q2) *People often have different views on the ethical principles that should guide the performance of democracy. From the following list, please choose which is the most important principle associated to democratic performance and the second most important for you.* (Q3) *Please match the principles in the left column with the appropriate definition from the right column.* (Q4) *Having these principles in mind, please answer the following two questions by circling your position on a scale of 0–10, where 0 means totally disagree and 10 totally agree: 1. In a context of crisis, some of these principles governing public life can be ignored to the advantage of economic growth; 2. Corruption is part of the daily functioning of democracy.*

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Appendix 1

The appendix files are available online for this article.

Complementary information is also available at <http://www.apis.ics.ulisboa.pt/apis0065/>

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