08-07-2024 MONICA CHIARINI TREMBLAY – TRANSCRIPT

2 SPEAKERS
Fabian Tingelhoff
Monica Tremblay

Duration
18m 29s

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:03] Fabian Tingelhoff
Hello and welcome, everybody, to another interview from our DSR Academy. My name is Fabian Tingelhoff. I'm a research associate at the University of Saint Gall, and I have the tremendous opportunity today to interview Monica Tremblay. Monica, you are a Professor of Business at William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. You're living in the United States, and you're conducting research mostly on DSR and healthcare, as I've seen. But you are also an expert in conducting focus groups, which is going to be of a lot of interest today because we're talking a little bit more about the use of focus groups in design science research. But before I spoil too much, Monica, do you want to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit more?

[00:00:54] Monica Tremblay
Okay, so Monica Chiarini Tremblay and I, like Fabian said, I'm at the William & Mary School of Business. This is career number two for me. I spent 15 years in industry as an engineer and a systems analyst at ExxonMobil. Then I went to work for a company called Catalina Marketing that did market basket analysis on loyalty cards. This is where I got really into analytics. I graduated from the University of South Florida, and Alan Hevner was my dissertation advisor. And I probably had one of the very first sort of recognized design science dissertations. It wasn't very common when I graduated, though folks had been doing this type of work for a long time. It certainly wasn't invented at USF, but when that paper came out, design science started to get recognition as part of the information systems field.

[00:01:53] Fabian Tingelhoff
And how was it for you to be part of the very beginning of design science research, working with Alan Hevner directly at the battlegrounds?

[00:02:02] Monica Tremblay
It was fantastic. Yeah. You know, he had other students that had had technical dissertations. But because the paper had been published in MISQ, it started to get recognition, and I was part of the ICIS. Very, very first doctoral consortium that had an actual group with design science dissertations, which was also very exciting.

[00:02:27] Fabian Tingelhoff
That sounds so interesting and awesome. And I guess in that kind of research area or research context, also your research on DSR and focus groups started, or how did you come to also study focus groups? Because I've also seen you don't only have focus group papers or methodological papers on focus groups in DSR, but I think there's also a paper in EJIS for focus groups in general in IS. So you already did a lot of research in that regard, too.

[00:02:58] Monica Tremblay
So I tend to be sort of, even though I'm an engineer, at the crossroads of qualitative and DSR research. So some of my papers that I've recently published have been completely qualitative. I think there is a big overlap of qualitative and design science, because when we unbundle an artifact, I think one of the only

ways to really make sense of what is happening is often through qualitative research, which is asking people, What do you see? And focus groups are sort of interesting because when you get a group of people together, a lot of times they bounce off of each other. So somebody will say something, somebody will respond to that, and you really get some rich data that way.

[00:03:42] Fabian Tingelhoff
Yeah. And you say it. I mean, there's a huge overlap, especially for qualitative work. But I mean, we want to talk today about a book chapter you've written specifically on focus groups and DSR. So, you have to have found some kind of difference between focus groups in other research areas and DSR, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't have written that chapter. So can you give us a little bit more insight about why you felt the need for this book chapter?

[00:04:12] Monica Tremblay
So that book chapter is actually out of my dissertation. It was a very technical dissertation where I looked at the volatility of data coming in and when you start to aggregate it, which now seems pretty trivial. But back then, folks were just starting to grab data from different sources and aggregating it and then putting it out there for people to make decisions off of. I was worried that they didn't understand. Sometimes decisions are made when you aggregate data. So if things don't match, I throw them out. If I have missing values, I fill them in. But all of those decisions do have an effect in aggregate on a decision-maker; at least in my field work, they did. In fact, we had published a paper in Decision Support Systems before the focus group paper that talked about how folks's jobs change when they finally have access to aggregated data. So that's what I was worried about. So in my dissertation, I proposed a series of metrics that sort of gave the reliability of the data. Right. So I've aggregated data from all these sources, and it was in the context of health care. But before you make a decision, let me tell you a little bit about this data. Right. And you judge on your own if this is reliable enough. And at first, I thought about doing experiments because experiments are very controlled. But what I was worried about was that, when doing an experiment, you have to be very rigid with experiments in order to see a delta. And I'd have to assume away a lot of complexity. So then I thought of doing things like thinking out loud or doing interviews. But I needed to get experts and a lot of them, and I thought it would be more useful to get groups of people to do this and then compare one group to the other. And furthermore, I thought, let me use a group of people, these exploratory focus groups, to tell me how they feel about my artifact in case I need to change it a little bit. And then let's use these confirmatory focus groups to confirm that, indeed, these metrics that I was giving them had utility or efficacy. So that's sort of how that came to be. And I had worked for a marketing company before I started my PhD. So focus groups are really common in marketing, and that's sort of where the idea came from. Because I had been in them, I had conducted them, and it felt sort of natural to do them again.

[00:06:42] Fabian Tingelhoff
I mean, you already hinted at one of the key points of your paper, which is basically differentiating between different kinds of purposes for focus groups, as you said. Exploratory, confirmatory. But what are the other key insights from your paper? How would you summarize what researchers need to do if they want to use focus groups in the context of DSR?

[00:07:06] Monica Tremblay
So there are a few things. When I did my dissertation, I didn't have a ton of money. So I led the focus groups. I do think that it's probably better if you are not leading the focus groups, because you will have a tendency to try to lead them to what you want them to say. Whereas if you're just observing, then you can maybe meet with the person who's facilitating the focus groups later and sort of come to a convergence on what

you want the script to look like. So I probably would have done something a little different than I have. In my newer work, I try not to be the person leading the focus groups. The other thing is that it sounds simpler than it is. A lot of times, focus groups will run away from you, and conversations will just start going on a tangent. And that's again where an experienced focus group facilitator is important because they can bring the conversation back and then also thinking about how you're going to analyze the data because it's qualitative analysis. So what type of coding structure are you going to use? I think it's a challenge. And I'm leaning more later in my work toward thinking of a multi-method sort of evaluation. So the focus group is part of it, but another evaluation comes after.

[00:08:28] Fabian Tingelhoff
That's really interesting because I also think that it's not usually what you would expect before starting focus groups in your research, for example, you not being the part taking yourself out of the equation when conducting focus groups. So I think this is very valuable advice. I mean also exceeding that. What would you say is most difficult and challenging when using focus groups in your DSR projects? Do you think there's something that researchers need to particularly invest more time in to get skilled in ensuring the success of their focus groups?

[00:09:05] Monica Tremblay
So it's very contextual, right? It has to do with whatever you're evaluating. In the chapter, I actually do manipulation within the focus group. So I show them something before, I tell them about the metric, and then I show them something after. And I try to see that there's a change in how they think about things. So that's one way to do it. Right? It is sort of, I think, inherited from my original idea of doing an experiment. So I'm like, Well, maybe I can do this in the focus group, and it actually worked really well. But you could also just have people work through an exercise together, like you would a group project in a class as a focus group. So with my colleague Arturo Castellanos, we had a paper published in JAIS where we looked at user-generated content. And we did it exactly that way. So we had groups of people think through it; they were talking about basic classes. How do you categorize things? And we just had them work through an exercise together and just sort of tried to look for convergence between all the focus groups. But another challenge is: who do you invite to be in these focus groups? Because it's always hard to get participants, but also, do you want them to be super experts? You have to pay close attention to who the participants are.

[00:10:28] Fabian Tingelhoff
Definitely, and that also depends on what you are inviting them for. Which exactly ties back to your book chapter. I also have another question on that. So if I were to invite you today to write such a book chapter again, do you think you would write anything differently, or do you think there's anything new you would want to include? You would want to say?

[00:10:55] Monica Tremblay
It's been a while since I read it. Certainly, things have changed as far as how you can get people to participate. So one thing I learned during the pandemic is that you can actually do them online pretty well. We were working on a paper, we had the IRB. So our science group at the university agreed that we could do this research. And then the pandemic hit, and we had to run focus groups, which we ran on zoom. And I never would have thought that that would have worked, but it actually worked really well. Not just that, it allowed us to get more participants because we didn't have to put them in a room. We didn't have to feed them, you know, a lot of things. The setup is so much easier. You can record really easily. So I think if I were to rewrite that chapter, I would think about, you know, 15 years later, what technology itself has done to allow us to do focus groups in different ways.

[00:11:52] Fabian Tingelhoff
This is so funny that you say that, because I think it really also ties back to expertise, because I was part of a focus group during Covid online with, let's say, not such an experienced focus group facilitator. And it was really hard, and it really got off the rails quite fast. So I think that is another reason why people should read your book chapter and why people should listen to that interview after all. And exactly coming to that, what are you most proud of? Coming to your DSR impact in general, is there anything you would say, like, this is research you have conducted with a contribution you are particularly fond of in the DSR domain?

[00:12:34] Monica Tremblay
Well, first of all, I'm just so excited that DSR is doing so well. There was a period there when I finished that it was so hard to publish our work, and it was a little discouraging. In fact, I took a little detour and went to medical informatics because it was just easier to get my work published there. But now I see a lot of DSR in really good journals. It's really positive. You know, you mentioned the ISR workshop at ECIS. Well, my group was all design science papers, which is so positive for one of our most important journals to have two, not one, but two tables full of DSR out of maybe ten. So a good amount. As far as my work, I'm still very surprised at how much this chapter resonated. There's also a CAIS version of this, and it's my most cited work. I would have never guessed; you know, I did it out of necessity. I'm like, I have to evaluate this artifact. There wasn't very much out there as far as how to evaluate, what's a good evaluation, and why we are doing evaluations. So I'm just surprised at how well it resonated. And I'm happy that people are using it.

[00:13:43] Fabian Tingelhoff
Yeah. I mean, your book chapter alone has a few hundred citations. So, I mean, this is just another emphasis on you saying that. This is also a question I have for you. You have published in very, very prestigious journals with DSR. I mean, I think you just first authored in MISQ a few years ago. You published in ISR, JAIS, and EJIS, basically all the main journals, and a lot of aspiring DSR researchers are going to see this. So do you have any recommendations for publishing your DSR research in high-class IS journals?

[00:14:24] Monica Tremblay
So first of all, you have to be passionate about the topic. I know that sounds really blasé, but you should, because the journey is hard, right? I want to say that I probably have a ten-fold rejection rate to acceptance rate. That's pretty tough. Be open. Right now, I have revised and resubmitted in the Informs Journal on Computing. It's not an IS basket journal, but I'm very excited about that paper. It's really interesting. What we're trying to do is really interesting. So don't be so focused only on IS journals. I know that we all have career paths that we want to go down, but there are some journals outside of the IS realm that are also very important and very impactful. Persevere and probably one of the things I don't know if this is going to be really popular, but you have to be careful because we have so many very prescriptive IS journals like you must do this, and next you must do this, and you must have those principles, and you must have this. Do the work, and then make it match. What is it that you're doing? If design principles naturally come out, then by all means do that. If they don't be up front about why that doesn't really work for this particular article, I think part of what we're all going to struggle with and continue to struggle with is that our design science projects are so long, right? And packaging them for a journal is so hard because, you know, you either delegate everything to an appendix or it's hard to package them. So that takes some skill. But I think I'm a little jealous of young people like you doing design science research, because there's definitely way more opportunity to publish this work. And, you know, go read the papers that are published and see how they're doing it. That's probably the best advice.

[00:16:16] Fabian Tingelhoff

It's easier for us to publish because people like you have built up this entire domain and continue to do so, which makes it even greater that I have the opportunity to talk with you today.

[00:16:26] Monica Tremblay
Thank you, Fabian.

[00:16:27] Fabian Tingelhoff
Maybe one last question to top off our interview. Which is very broad, and I realize that. But are there any particular things or developments you would desire for the DSR field as a whole? Either in conducting DSR or publishing DSR, how would you envision this field developing in the future?

[00:16:52] Monica Tremblay
I think, honestly, I'm probably very biased, but we're the future of the field, right? Because we're not computer scientists, we're not claiming to build the next best algorithm, though some of our colleagues are. But in general, we just unpack the artifact. Right? And we build artifacts, and we think of ways these artifacts can generalize, most often in business-like environments. And there's a tremendous future in this because technology is running at warp speed. Our work is never done. We now have to consider large language models—you know, automation. Like every day, there's just a new development where we can think of, like, how do we unpack the artifact and think of ways or theorize of ways that we can improve business decision-making, health care outcomes, you name it, whatever your context is. So I think it's pretty exciting. For a long time, IS was only one type of research, and then qualitative researchers started to get some of the daylight from the journals. And I think design science is there now where we're getting a lot of attention, which is great.

[00:18:03] Fabian Tingelhoff
Most definitely. So thank you so much for being here with me. Do you have anything else you want to say to our viewers?

[00:18:12] Monica Tremblay
No, thank you for having me. If anybody has any questions, you know where to find me.

[00:18:17] Fabian Tingelhoff
Perfect. Thank you so much. Thank you for contributing to our project. Have a great day.

[00:18:22] Monica Tremblay
You too. Bye bye.

[00:18:24] Fabian Tingelhoff
Bye bye.

END OF TRANSCRIPT