

SUCCESSFUL FOCUS GROUPS

Advancing the State of the Art

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editor

A SAGE FOCUS EDITION

Part one examines a series of basic principles that are relevant to all focus group research, regardless of the type of focus group one is doing. In the first chapter, Richard Krueger and I discuss not just “when to do focus groups and why,” but also when not to do them and why not to do them. As part of the maturing of our field, we need to recognize that focus groups have some very real limitations, and we need to avoid the temptation to apply them to every possible topic under the sun. At the same time, there is no reason that we should be shy about our virtues, so we extol the advantages of focus groups and explode some myths about them. We end the chapter with our own consideration of the strengths of focus groups, showing how the unique advantages of focus groups can help one decide when to use them.

The second chapter, by James Frey and Andrea Fontana called “The Group Interview in Social Research,” is the only one that is reprinted from a previous publication. These authors place focus groups within the larger realm of types of group interviews. Too often, it seems that focus groups are virtually the only form of group interview, but Frey and Fontana show that various forms of group interviews have been used quite widely, even if they have not been so widely acknowledged. One way that our field can grow is not only by considering other possible ways of doing things but also by realizing that we have some unquestioned assumptions about what we do and why we do it a particular way. By comparing focus groups with other forms of group interviews, Frey and Fontana offer us an excellent opportunity to challenge our presuppositions.

In Chapter 3, John Knodel takes up issues of design and analysis from a practical point of view. This emphasis on applying design principles in research projects using focus groups is rapidly becoming one of the hallmarks of our field. Knodel’s discussion of design issues is especially strong for studies that use the researcher’s theoretical interests to break the total set of participants into separate subsets. This strategy of comparing and contrasting groups that represent different perspectives is a powerful example of focus group research design. Importantly, Knodel shows how this initial design decision carries through into the analysis as well as in the collection of the data. In addition, his practical orientation to these issues will provide readers with many useful suggestions.

In Chapter 4, Terrance Albrecht, Gerianne Johnson, and Joseph Walther bring fresh perspective to focus groups by considering them from the point of view of communication researchers. Among the topics they consider are validity issues, influence processes, and comparisons to nominal groups and Delphi groups. Of particular interest is their discussion of fantasy themes as a way both to stimulate group communication and analyze the shared discourse in groups. They end with a series of recommendations that summarize the applicability of principles from communications research to focus groups. By offering a combination of new ideas and innovative approaches to familiar problems, this chapter provides a strong demonstration of the value of interdisciplinary contacts for the growth of our field.

In the fifth chapter, Richard Krueger reviews the wide range of factors that affect the quality of focus groups. Like many of us, he is concerned that the rapid growth of interest in focus groups will lead to problems of quality control. By providing a thorough summary of the different factors that can affect the quality of research, he paints an accurate picture of the complexities of focus groups. But Krueger is no exponent of doom and gloom; instead, he uses each of his 10 factors to point out specific things that focus group researchers should be doing to ensure the quality of the work that we do. His approach thus emphasizes a major theme that runs through all of the chapters in Part I: We need to be aware of the implicit choices that we are making as we design, conduct, and analyze our focus groups. To get good results, we need to make smart choices, and these four chapters provide a valuable guide to making such choices.

Part II contains four chapters that consider ways of combining focus groups with other methods. Certainly the best known use of focus groups in combination with other methods has been a preliminary step in the development of survey instruments. Unfortunately, despite the widespread popularity of this practice, relatively little has been written about what is involved in the actual execution of focus groups for the development of survey instruments. By remedying this omission, the first two chapters in this section are important steps toward a systematic body of knowledge on this intersection of qualitative and quantitative methods.

In Chapter 6, Theodore Fuller, John Edwards, Sairudee Vorakitphokatorn, and Santhat Sermisri describe the insights that they gained by using focus groups to develop a survey on the effects of crowding in Bangkok, Thailand. As they note, their major concepts were already in place, based on research in the United States, but they needed to translate more than just the language to make their questions appropriate in a different cultural context. They found that their focus groups were particularly valuable for validating the relevancy of their existing concepts, formulating new hypotheses, and pointing the research team toward the best way of communicating with the target audience for their survey.

In Chapter 7, Kerth O'Brien presents her development of a questionnaire on the responses of gay and bisexual men to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Once again, the formulation of the questions is central to this process to, as she puts it, help the investigator to ask the right questions and to ask them in the right way. In addition, O'Brien shows how focus groups provide insights into issues of sample location and recruitment as well as establishing the credibility of the researcher and the project. All of these issues are important when working with vulnerable and understudied populations, and this chapter is particularly notable for showing how focus groups can help survey researchers to resolve these problems.

These preliminary uses of focus groups in the development of surveys differ from the truly triangulated combination of these two methods that Brent Wolff, John Knodel, and Werasit Sittitrai take up in Chapter 8. They report on a study that simultaneously used focus groups and surveys to investigate how changes in family size were linked to the well-being of villagers in rural Thailand. The authors show how focus groups can contribute to a multimethod approach by confirming and illustrating findings, clarifying and elaborating on unexpected or contradictory results, and uncovering new explanatory categories that were not foreseen at the start of the project. Overall, they show how a carefully designed combination of methods can produce results that clearly are more than the sum of the separate parts.

Chapter 9 by Benjamin Crabree, Kim Yanoshik, William Miller, and Patrick O'Connor concludes Part II by moving away from surveys to consider the combination of group and individual interviews. If the three preceding chapters represent long overdue descriptions of increasingly common practices, this one explores subjects that have been, to this point, largely overlooked. Based on their experiences with each technique, Crabtree et al. point out a number of factors that can influence the choice between individual and group interviews: time and money, depth versus breadth, interview dynamics, communication context, analysis and sampling issues, method as intervention, and logistics. The portrait that emerges is a classic summary of the relative advantages and disadvantages of each technique. Although, as the authors note in their conclusion, we still need to do more research that directly compares group and individual interviews, the lessons that they have learned from their experiences are an important first step toward a greater understanding of the complementary nature of these two forms of interviewing.

In contrast to Part II, the chapters in Part III take up issues that apply to projects that rely solely on focus groups. Chapter 10, by Raymond Padilla, begins this section by discussing ways that focus groups can help to implement the kind of participatory research advocated by Paulo Freire. What he terms dialogical research actually involves two different dialogues: that among the research participants and that between the participants and the researchers. It is the

dialogue between the researchers and the participants that defines this form of research, and the goal is to direct everyone's efforts to meeting the participants' needs. In addition to presenting the role of focus groups in this process, Padilla forcefully reminds us that our purposes must define our methods. Thus this chapter not only demonstrates the variety of uses for focus groups but also challenges our thinking about how we use focus groups for our own research goals.

In Chapter 11, Richard Zeller presents three principles for conducting groups that involve sensitive topics: capitalizing on reactivity, using self-disclosure, and legitimizing participants' responses. In doing so, he nicely illustrates how to apply basic knowledge from such fields as research methodology, communication studies, and social psychology to resolving specific issues in focus group research. Because Zeller uses standard principles from the social sciences as the foundation for developing his strategies, the many concrete examples from his own research on sexuality also have immediate relevance for those working with other sensitive topics. Overall, this chapter provides an excellent illustration of the linkage between the fundamental knowledge base of the social sciences and practical strategies for designing focus group research projects.

Robin Jarretts' chapter considers the complexities of doing focus groups with low-income, minority women. Many of the issues she discusses (access, rapport, etc.) will be familiar to most qualitative researchers, but these issues often receive too little attention in focus group research. We need to think carefully about all the procedures in our research projects and not just concentrate on those golden minutes within the groups themselves. As Jarrett demonstrates, these procedural issues can be vital when working with hard-to-reach groups. Still, as she points out, many of the general principles of focus group research will apply to our roles as researchers with such groups, as well as to the kinds of discussions that happen in these groups. As her own research so ably demonstrates, our work with groups that lie outside the stereotypic mainstream requires a balance between the generalities that we can apply to most groups and a sensitivity to the specific issues that apply to specialized populations.

In Chapter 13, Thomas Plaut, Suzanne Landis, and June Trevor present their work with community-based health care in the last chapter in this section. Their application of focus groups is an admirable example of how to use the participants' own perspectives in designing a large scale, long-term intervention. They also show (as does O'Brien in Chapter 7), that the kinds of contacts that occur in focus groups are not just a source of data but also a way for researchers to show that they take the participants' views seriously and thus to build the kind of trust that long-term relationships require. The programs that these authors have created demonstrate that effective community-based interventions must do more than meet the needs of the community; they must come from the community, and focus groups are powerful means of facilitating this process.

The final section of the book consists only of Chapter 14, my report on a series of focus groups at the Menucha Conference that envisioned "future directions for focus groups." In our groups, we discussed four areas that we considered vital to our future as a field: doing more research on focus groups, creating more links to other disciplines, developing focus groups for various purposes, and working on technology issues. Because these general themes connect with the more detailed presentations in the earlier chapters, this concluding chapter provides a useful summary of the larger issues that we are dealing with as a field. This dual attention to both practical and abstract issues also illustrates our two broad approaches to creating successful focus groups: helping researchers to find the solutions that are already within reach and encouraging innovative work that will expand the boundaries of our field.

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