

When to Use Focus Groups and Why

DAVID L. MORGAN
RICHARD A. KRUEGER

Too often, decision making about focus groups is governed by myths. Other chapters in this volume address the myths that surround the technical issues of how to do focus groups (see also Morgan, 1992). In this chapter, we will first tackle the mythology surrounding the appropriate uses for focus groups, then point out some reasons *not* to use focus groups, and finish with some of our views about when focus groups are most likely to have advantages over other research methods. Our goal is to give the reader a better basis for making decisions about when and why to use focus groups for a particular purpose.

Social science and evaluation research are still at a stage at which most of our knowledge about focus groups comes from personal experience rather than systematic investigation. Even so, the past several years have seen a rapid expansion in the range of experiences that we have been able to draw on. Until quite recently, much of our knowledge about focus groups came from marketing researchers. Now we know much more about how to apply focus groups in our own areas of interest. This chapter is a step toward systematizing our experience to guide future work. As those of us with social science and evaluation research backgrounds have expanded our experience with using focus groups, we have learned that too many of the "rules" derived from other fields turned out to be undependable when applied to our own needs and goals. The reasons why marketers use focus groups are not the same as the reasons why evaluation researchers use focus groups. And the reasons

why evaluators use focus groups are not the same as the reasons why academic researchers use focus groups.

In our view, having the ability to draw on the experiences of researchers from a number of different domains helps us all. And that is the reason for our collaboration on this chapter. Krueger represents experience with focus groups in program development and evaluation. Morgan represents experience with focus groups in academically oriented qualitative research. Together, our goal is to compare and summarize our experiences to guide others. At the same time, we are mindful that if we had limited ourselves to following only the advice that was available when we each began doing focus groups, we would never have discovered many of the possibilities we will be discussing here. So we encourage our readers to learn from our experiences but not to feel bound by them.

Some Common Myths About Focus Groups

Reaching intelligent decisions about when to use focus groups requires that we go beyond the mythology that has guided too much of past practice. There are myths about both the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups. We have been too hasty in assuming that focus groups are appropriate for some purposes and too slow in applying them to other purposes. We will thus question myths about both when to use focus groups and when not to. In each case, we will get at the assumptions behind the myth, so that the reader can make a well-reasoned decision about how these issues apply to any particular research project.

Focus Groups Are Cheap and Quick

Focus groups often *appear* to be done cheaply because the research team donates a large amount of labor or the labor is paid for from another source. If a volunteer or staff member can moderate the groups, analyze the data, and prepare the report, then actual monetary outlays can be minimized. If it is necessary to hire professionals to do these tasks, however, total project costs can easily exceed \$1000 per group and may even fall into the range of \$3000 to \$4000 per group.

Focus groups can only be done quickly in very unusual circumstances. Although the group itself may last only 1 or 2 hours, it takes time to create an effective set of questions, locate the appropriate participants, and make sense of the data they provide. Recruitment and

analysis are especially likely to be expensive and time-consuming, unless the participants are already at hand and the project goals are very limited and direct.

The myth that focus groups can be done cheaply and quickly has led to many inappropriate uses of focus groups, based more on expediency than on the appropriateness of the method for the purposes at hand. The reality is that focus groups require planning, effort, and resources, just like every other research method. And, just like every other research method, making a realistic assessment of time and money issues at the beginning of a project is a good way to avoid problems later on.

Focus Groups Require Moderators With Highly Developed Professional Skills

Those of us who work in evaluation and qualitative social science had to confront this myth early on, due to the lack of trained moderators in our fields. In reality, it may be more than merely feasible to find a good moderator from within the research team, it may in fact be preferable to do so. This is particularly true when there is a real need for a moderator who has a detailed familiarity with either the project goals or the participants' points of view. For example, when the research project's goals are in a continual state of evolution, someone who is directly involved in the project can do a better job of steering the discussion in useful directions. Or when the participants are part of a distinctive cultural group, someone with the appropriate sensitivity may be a more effective moderator than someone who merely has professional credentials.

Worrying about the skills a professional moderator would bring to a project often gets the project heading in the wrong direction right from the beginning. Instead, the first-order goals should be to define what the purposes of the project are and who the participants in the groups should be. Then one can confront the real issue: What kind of moderator will it take to get useful data from these participants?

Too much emphasis on the moderator's skills also diverts attention from the fact that the outcome of a research project depends on more than just the ability to lead a group. Most important, if the research team lacks the requisite analysis skills, then the quality of the group discussions hardly matters. Even as mundane a matter as recruitment may override the importance of the moderator's contributions, if it proves impossible to provide enough participants in the appropriate categories. The lesson is that a successful focus group project requires a variety of skills and

often depends on the input of several different members of a qualified research team. Just because the moderator's role is a distinctive aspect of focus groups, we must not lose sight of the other contributions that are also necessary.

In demythologizing professional moderators, it is just as important, however, not to create a new myth that anyone can moderate a focus group. The moderator is the instrument in a focus group interview. If the moderator, as the data-collection instrument, is not prepared, not attentive or not skillful, then the results will be just as bad as in a poorly prepared survey questionnaire. Consequently, on-the-job-training will not be appropriate in many projects. On balance, when seeking alternatives to professional moderators, the key is to find someone who has experience working with groups (not necessarily *leading* groups) and who is also capable of working with both the research team and the participants in this particular project.

Focus Groups Must Consist of Strangers

This is a good example of a useful rule of thumb that has become an overly rigid restriction on when to use focus groups. Limiting ourselves to groups composed of strangers would make it exceedingly difficult to conduct focus groups in organizations, communities, and other ongoing social settings. For social scientists and evaluators, our need to work in such settings means that we often do encounter problems with prior acquaintance, but we resolve this issue by adjusting our uses of the method, rather than walking away from the problem.

The most obvious design strategy is to rely on a skilled moderator to meet the challenges posed by such groups. Another way to minimize problems with group composition is through extra effort in selecting and ordering the questions in the interview guide. Expanding the number of groups will also help with the goal of seeing beyond the narrow set of concerns that may dominate a particular set of acquaintances. These additional efforts are easily justifiable when such groups are often the only way to address a particular research question.

People Will Not Talk About Sensitive Topics in Focus Groups

This myth seems to be based on commonsense imaginings of what people might be willing to discuss in groups. In actual experience, people readily talk about a wide range of personal and emotional topics.

A good example is Knodel et al.'s (1987) work on family size and birth control issues in rural Thailand. Of course, research involving sensitive topics does require careful planning, and Zeller (in this volume) discusses a number of techniques for creating a safe atmosphere for self-disclosure.

Practical experience also points to a very different problem: the overdisclosure of sensitive information. This can happen when the momentum in a group leads participants to reveal details of their personal lives that they would ordinarily keep private. Too often, there is a certain thrill in the open discussion of taboo topics. If the moderator does not pull back from the initial disclosure of oversensitive information, other participants may well come forth with even more personal revelations. When these discussions are tape recorded, an additional ethical issue is posed.

Once again, however, we need to guard against creating a new myth: We are not claiming that people will talk about anything and everything in focus groups. The reality is that researchers who work with sensitive topics must make plans to both encourage appropriate self-disclosures and discourage disclosures that go beyond the legitimate aims of the research.

Focus Groups Tend to Produce Conformity

This myth is another instance of a confusion between focus groups and other kinds of groups. In particular, conformity as a problem was highlighted by social psychologists working with group decision making, but focus groups almost never push groups to make decisions. Similarly, nominal group research methods often seek consensual solutions among group members, but focus groups almost never push participants to reach a consensus.

Instead of such conformity-producing goals as making decisions or reaching consensus, focus groups emphasize the goal of finding out as much as possible about participants' experiences and feelings on a given topic. A good moderator will strive to create an open and permissive atmosphere in which each person feels free to share her or his point of view. When there is some fear that pressures toward conformity may limit discussion, the opening instructions to the group can emphasize that you want to hear about a range of different experiences and feelings, and subsequent questions and probes can follow up on this theme by asking for other points of view. When participants see that the researchers are

genuinely interested in learning as much as possible about their experiences and feelings, then conformity is seldom a problem.

Focus Groups Are a Natural Means of Collecting Data

Rather than arguing about whether focus groups are natural, it is best to consider where they fit within a range of data-gathering techniques. In terms of research methods, focus groups use more natural settings than some techniques (surveys) and less natural settings than others (participant observation). Furthermore, as Frey and Fontana (in this volume) point out, focus groups use more natural settings than some group interviews (laboratory studies of group dynamics) and less natural settings than others (field observations of ongoing groups). Even within focus groups, there is a range of naturalness, from video taping in specially designed facilities that have observers and one-way mirrors to home-based conversations among neighbors.

It is important not to confuse the use of *natural settings* with the larger goal of conducting *naturalistic inquiries* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In nearly all focus group projects, the goal is to collect concentrated discussions on topics of interest to the researcher, but the discussion of these topics may or may not feel natural to the participants. Thus in assessing the naturalness of a set of focus groups, the match between the researchers' topics of interest and the participants' topics of ordinary conversation is often more important than the characteristics of the research setting.

Focus Groups Should Not Be Used for Decision Making

This myth is most common in marketing research, where there is a heavy reliance on sample surveys as inputs to decision making. It is hardly surprising that research projects involving consumer products devote large amounts of resources to generalizing their results to large populations, given that the costs of making inappropriate decisions may be quite high. The issues are very different, however, when resources are more limited, or when decisions have less costly consequences.

To determine whether focus groups are adequate for making a decision, the researcher should begin by asking how difficult it would be to obtain "better" information. When monetary resources are scarce, the choice may be between making decisions based on focus groups versus no data at all. Even when resources do allow a choice between focus

groups and other methods, the appropriate question is whether other methods provide enough improvement in the data to justify a greater expenditure of money or effort. We also need to consider the consequences of a wrong decision. If a mistake is not costly or is easily reversed, then extensive data collection procedures of any form may be a poor investment. Overall, we need to replace a knee-jerk rejection of focus groups as a basis for decision making with a careful specification of when they can provide useful information in a cost-effective manner.

Focus Groups Must Be Validated by Other Methods

This is part of a general myth that relegates all qualitative methods to a preliminary, exploratory role that prepares the way for "real research." This myth has been applied to focus groups with particular force in marketing research, with its already-noted emphasis on survey research as a basis for decision making.

One response to claims that the findings of focus groups and other qualitative methods need to be validated by quantitative methods is to present situations in which qualitative methods have a distinct advantage. An obvious case is projects that are directed at specific contexts, as is often the case in evaluation research. When the research topic involves understanding the success or failure of a particular program in a specific setting, focus groups may well be the most efficient and effective tool for uncovering the reasons behind this outcome. Thus when one's goal is specification rather than generalization, focus groups and other qualitative methods are likely to be preferred over quantitative methods.

The goal of learning why a particular project succeeded or failed also highlights a larger point. Regardless of the setting, projects that are trying to answer how-and-why questions need to use very different methods than projects that are trying to answer what-and-how-many questions (Yin, 1989). When the goal is to generate theories or explanations, focus groups and other qualitative methods are the appropriate tools.

At the same time that we attack the myth that focus groups must be backed up by other methods, we still want to advocate the goal of improving our research efforts through a judicious combination of methods. There are many situations in which such combinations will yield data that are more useful than either method taken alone. Thus there is nothing wrong

with the already classic use of focus groups in the early stages of large survey research projects, so long as it does not “ghettoize” focus groups by limiting them to preliminary exploration. Another promising combination is the pairing of individual and group interviews within qualitative studies, but this is an area in which there has been surprisingly little research (see Crabtree et al., this volume). All in all, there is every sign that combinations of methods that celebrate the contributions of focus groups will be continuing sources of new insights into when and why to use focus groups.

When Not to Use Focus Groups

The great advantage of expanding our methodological tool kit is that new techniques allow us to do a better job of matching our tools to our needs. There is an old proverb that when your only tool is a hammer, all problems will appear to be nails. Seen in this light, focus groups are not just a different way of doing things we have been doing all along, they may also lead us to change the very way that we think about the problems that interest us.

The downside of new methods is captured in a different hammer proverb: “When you give a small child a hammer, he [*sic*] will discover that a lot of things need pounding” (Kaplan, 1964). As a result, focus groups will be used to “pound” so many things that a few of them are guaranteed to get broken. As responsible researchers, it is our duty to consider situations that extend focus groups beyond their actual range of utility.

In presenting the list below, we have tried to avoid problems that can occur with any research method. For example, one should not undertake research when one has too little control over the research situation. For focus groups, this often involves sponsors, supervisors, or other influentials who want to handpick the participants; this selection bias, whether direct or inadvertent, can severely jeopardize the results of the focus group process. Similarly, many of the caveats that apply to qualitative research in general also apply to focus groups. In particular, most qualitative research is based on trust and open communication, so it makes no sense to attempt focus groups unless the researchers are respectful, tolerant, and considerate of the target audience.

Do Not Use Focus Groups When the Primary Intent Is Something Other Than Research

The primary purpose of projects that rely on focus groups is to collect qualitative data to answer research questions. Unfortunately, there is a constituency that wants to apply the term *focus groups* to other purposes, such as resolving conflicts, building consensus, increasing communication, changing attitudes, and making decisions. The issue is not whether these are legitimate purposes for groups—it is whether groups with such purposes are in any real sense focus groups. Work groups make decisions in committees and increase consensus and communication during team-building sessions and retreats. Support groups and group therapy can reorganize individuals’ lives. And the ability of groups to change opinions and behaviors is one of the most basic findings in social science (Lewin, 1951). What sets these various groups apart from focus groups is the fact that they are done for purposes other than collecting data. Of course, this difference in purpose typically means that these groups will be conducted very differently from focus groups, and their results will be used in very different ways.

Given that the primary purpose of focus groups is to collect qualitative data, the fact that they are groups means that they may also serve other purposes as secondary functions. These secondary roles must, however, be clear from the beginning. This is particularly true when one is working for outside agencies and organizations, where there may be a very broad sense of what “research” is. In that case, the researcher must be completely clear about the purposes that the sponsor expects the focus groups to serve, and must be equally clear in presenting focus groups as data-collection devices for answering research questions. When the *sponsors* are pursuing some other goal, such as conveying a sense of listening or an impression of responsiveness, there undoubtedly is another tool that is better suited to their needs.

Do Not Use Focus Groups When a Group Discussion Is Not an Appropriate Forum

The basic goal in conducting focus groups is to hear from the participants about on the topics of interest to the researcher. This means that

focus groups are not a viable option unless we can compose and conduct groups in ways that allow participants to voice their views.

This issue first arises when determining who the participants in the groups will be. Composing groups that make some participants unwilling to express themselves defeats the purpose of the research. This is most likely to occur when the group is not homogeneous in regard to the research topic, as when both employees and supervisors are interviewed about work-group issues. Even in relatively homogeneous groups, free expression can be squelched by demanding that each group reach a consensus. This limiting of participants' self-expression also occurs in projects that emphasize the researcher's point of view, rather than the participants'. In focus groups, our goal should be to listen to the participants' points of view, and groups that limit the participants' opportunity to present their own feelings, opinions, and experiences are counter to this goal.

Ethical concerns are other obvious reasons why a group discussion could be a poor choice. As we noted earlier in our discussion of underdisclosure and overdisclosure, focus groups clearly can be conducted on sensitive topics (witness their popularity in AIDS research). Such research must, however, be extremely careful in regard to ethical issues, and insufficient attention to these issues is a sure way to dampen the open discussion that is at the very heart of focus groups. A major concern here is the protection of confidentiality from other members within the group. Although the research can reasonably ensure confidentiality of the official research data, the researcher cannot ensure that information will not be disclosed by other participants in the focus group. Strategies such as asking people not to disclose what they have heard in the group can backfire.

A different problem in generating a group discussion involves the sheer mechanics of assembling and conducting groups composed of certain types of participants. In this case, the participants are quite willing to discuss the topic at hand, but bringing the individuals together to do so poses insurmountable obstacles. It is difficult to assemble groups of widely dispersed participants, especially those with transportation difficulties (see Crabtree et al., this volume). It also is difficult to conduct groups with participants who have problems with the social aspects of participating in groups, especially those with extreme mental or behavioral disturbances. Overall, it is simply not possible to interview every type of person, and some of the problems that affect interviewing as a general means of data collection are magnified in groups.

Do Not Use Focus Groups When the Topic Is Not Appropriate for the Participants

The match between the researchers' topics of interest and the participants' ability to discuss those topics is essential for successful focus groups. To assess this match during the planning stages, ask the basic question, "How easy will it be to generate a free-flowing and productive conversation on this topic?"

A mismatch with the researchers' interests occurs most often when participants have too little involvement in the topic. Evaluators and social scientists seldom gain much by asking participants to report on things that are beyond their experience. The classic example is in comparisons of users and nonusers of some service, when it is like pulling teeth to get the latter to come up with anything to say about their lack of experience. Similar problems occur when the participants do have relevant experiences, but the researchers go after them at the wrong level of specificity by seeking either too big a picture or too detailed a picture.

Interestingly, a different mismatch with the researchers' interests can occur when the participants' involvement with the topic is too high. This situation may lead participants into efforts at self-promotion or an obligation to know the answers. Over-involvement is especially common among expert informants who may have thought about an issue so much that they no longer know what they don't know. Avoid the strike it rich temptation of concentrating on a single, highly knowledgeable segment.

Another problem with inappropriate topics occurs when we assemble the appropriate groups, but then ask inappropriate questions. Certain types of questions yield little benefit, but participants like to talk about them anyway. This happens when focus group participants want to talk about solution strategies even before they have identified the nature of the problem. Indeed, some solutions are best left in the hands of experts. For example, lay participants may not have the requisite experience, training, or insight to plan a particular event or program; however, they can tell us a great deal about their previous experiences with similar events or programs. Thus an appropriate set of questions will concentrate on the areas for which a particular set of participants can contribute to the overall goals of the project.

The best match between researchers' and participants' interests happens when they each share the same goals: Producing useful information. When

such a goal is not self-evident, careful attention to design issues can help to create a viable discussion. One solution is to work with a variety of questions within each group. This process allows the researcher to seek out the topics that are of interest to participants; it is especially useful for locating the level of specificity at which participants can comfortably and productively discuss the issues. A complementary strategy is to work with a variety of different groups. Comparisons across different categories of participants provide useful data on how good the match is between the research topic and the interests of each segment. This is particularly useful in assessing the validity of the views expressed by over-involved experts.

Do Not Use Focus Groups When Statistical Data Are Required

This final warning should fall under the heading of things that are so obvious that they do not need to be said. The key problem is that focus group samples are usually both unrepresentative and dangerously small. Even so, those who request focus groups often specifically ask for statistical results. For example, they may want to know what percent of the population fits into various categories. In these situations, focus groups might be helpful in ensuring that an eventual survey instrument is valid, but the statistical projections should not be made based solely on focus group results.

Another source of the temptation to create statistical data comes from the ease of polling participants in groups, or otherwise seeking "votes" on various subjects. This can be a useful technique for sparking further discussion, or simply for determining how much consensus is present in a group. But such "data" are of little value for characterizing the actual beliefs of any population.

Both of these situations differ from the legitimate kind of quantification involved in applying content analysis techniques to focus groups. The key difference is that content analysis is used for the explicit purpose of characterizing what is in a particular set of transcripts. Even here, however, the temptation is still strong to treat the numerical results as representing something more than what was said in these groups. The bottom line is that some kind of counting may occasionally be useful in either conducting or analyzing focus groups, but one must always keep the fundamentally qualitative purposes of focus groups firmly in mind.

The Advantages of Focus Groups

In this final section, we consider some of the situations for which focus group may be a particularly desirable research method. At some level, the decision to use focus groups in a research project is a decision *not* to use a good many other possible research methods. In making such a decision, it is helpful to know what the advantages of focus groups are. Although most existing treatments of focus groups (including our own) contain statements about the most likely uses for focus groups, these are usually pitched at a high level of generality. Indeed, more often than not, these statements describe situations in which any of several different qualitative methods could be appropriate.

Clearly, the thing that distinguishes focus groups is the presence of group interaction in response to researchers' questions. In this section, we present several types of goals that should lead researchers to give special consideration to focus groups because of the advantages provided by interaction among participants.

Consider Focus Groups When There Is a Power Differential Between Participants and Decision Makers

Those who hold positions of power and influence often need to gain feedback from those with no power. Normal channels of communication are sometimes not available and, when frustration is excessive, these situations can be explosive. The interaction that focus groups bring is useful in these situations because it allows groups of peers to express their perspective. Having the security of being among others who share many of their feelings and experiences, the participants possess a basis for sharing their views.

Thus focus group interviews, when conducted in a nonthreatening and permissive environment, are especially useful when working with categories of people who have historically had limited power and influence. This includes people of color as well as those with limited income or lower literacy skill. Of course, conducting research in the presence of a power imbalance often involves an ethical dimension, and the sponsors of such research should be informed of the risks associated with first empowering people to express their views and then ignoring these views.

Consider Focus Groups When There Is a Gap Between Professionals and Their Target Audiences

A gap between professionals and the target group can be due to such factors as language, culture, and region; furthermore, the professionals involved may be decision makers, academics, and administrators, for example. Many professional disciplines are facing crises because their language and logic are too different and removed from the people they are trying to serve. Physicians, professors, teachers, architects, business executives, attorneys, and others have all developed ways of thinking about reality that may be substantially different from the people they are trying to reach.

Because the interactions in focus groups provide a clear view of how others think and talk, they are a powerful means of exposing professionals to the reality of the customer, student, or client. In addition, because the professionals work with the research team to set the questions for the discussions, they can get immediate and vivid feedback about how others respond to their ideas. The advantages that focus groups provide for bridging such gaps help to explain their popularity in such otherwise diverse applications as showing manufacturers how consumers respond to their products, helping survey researchers find appropriate questionnaire topics and wording, and providing public health workers with new insights into promoting healthy behavior.

Consider Focus Groups When Investigating Complex Behavior and Motivations

It can be dangerous to oversimplify human motivation. By comparing the different points of view that participants exchange during the interactions in focus groups, researchers can examine motivation with a degree of complexity that is typically not available with other methods. When the goal is to modify behavior that depends on complex information flow or a mix of attitudes, knowledge, and past experiences, then focus groups can provide the researcher with a tool that is uniquely suited to the task. Of course, the goal of understanding complex behavior often requires more than one way of finding out about that behavior, so focus groups for this purpose will typically be used along with observation, secondary data, and other sources.

One of the most common examples of using focus groups to understand complex motivations is when people do not have easily accessible

ways of talking about a research topic. Normally, people are not in touch with or able to articulate their motivations, feelings, attitudes, and opinions. Many of the behaviors we might wish to understand are not matters of conscious importance to research participants. At the beginning of a focus group, such participants will not be immediately able to express all their feelings or motivations on a topic. As they hear others talk, however, they can easily identify the degree to which what they are hearing fits their situation. By comparing and contrasting, they can become more explicit about their own views. In addition, as they do express their own feelings and experiences, they may find that answering questions from the moderator and other participants makes them aware of things that they had not thought about before. Thus in contrast to surveys in which one is frequently warned against asking about a topic if people do not have prior opinions, the interaction in focus groups often creates a cuing phenomenon that has the potential for extracting more information than other methods.

But we should not assume that focus groups will always reveal deep motivational insights. They can also show that people may be less logical, less thoughtful, and less organized than we expected. By sharing their experiences with similar others, participants often feel free to admit things like, "I really just didn't think about it. I just did it." In these circumstances, listening to focus groups can be a good antidote to the overrational view that researchers and other professionals sometimes impose on their fellow human beings.

Consider Focus Groups to Learn More About the Degree of Consensus on a Topic

Often a major part of our research goal is to learn more about the range of opinions or experiences that people have. Focus groups have a strong advantage here because the interaction in the group can provide an explicit basis for exploring this issue. Of course, the degree of consensus in the group can only become open to observation if the researchers make it clear that they want to hear a range of opinions, so one should never mistake the failure to disagree for the actual presence of consensus.

One of the things that frequently becomes clear in such discussions is that each individual may have several different opinions about the subject. This is visible in statements of qualified agreement, such as "I agree with you, so long as . . ." It also shows up when apparent disagreements

are resolved by uncovering the presence or absence of some particular set of circumstances. This is the familiar realization that how one feels or what one does depends on the particular circumstances. The advantage of focus groups is that the exchanges among the participants help them to clarify for themselves just what it is that their opinion or behavior depends on. We, as researchers, can thus gain insights into both the range of opinions they have and the sets of circumstances that will lead to one response rather than another.

**Consider Focus Groups When You Need
a Friendly Research Method That Is
Respectful and Not Condescending
to Your Target Audience**

Focus groups have a unique niche for obtaining information as tensions between opposing parties begin to rise. Surveys and other means of obtaining information may be ineffective because neither party trusts the other's intentions. By creating and sustaining an atmosphere that promotes meaningful interaction, focus groups convey a humane sensitivity, a willingness to listen without being defensive, and a respect for opposing views that is unique and beneficial in these emotionally charged environments. Naturally, when the tensions are excessive, it is unlikely that focus groups or any other procedure will work adequately.

Even in situations that are not fraught with conflict, the friendliness of focus groups can be a major advantage. This friendliness extends to both the participants, who typically enjoy their interactions together, and to the end users of the research, who believe that they get a much better understanding of others' points of view through listening to their discussions. From the researcher's point of view, a successful focus groups project can help to forge a human connection between those who commission a project and those who serve as the subjects of their investigations. And, whether this helps to reduce tensions in troubled settings or simply makes people feel good about their experiences in the research process, it is a valuable end in itself.

Taken together, the points we discussed hardly constitute an exhaustive list of the advantages of focus groups or even of the advantages that flow from the opportunity to observe group interaction. Still, they

provide useful answers to our original questions of when and why to use focus groups. Before concluding, however, we would like to return to the point that any decision to use focus groups necessarily comes at the expense of other methods that are, at least implicitly, rejected.

One of the things that this chapter obviously does not include is a handy table or diagram that depicts which situations are or are not appropriate for focus groups. Such devices clearly have their advantages for showing beginners, especially graduate students, the applications and strengths of different methods. On the downside, however, such summaries give a misleading impression of the clarity and specificity of our decisions about which research methods to use. For seasoned researchers, the critical choice of which method to use is often based on what we know we can do well. This means that if you know you can get a good enough answer to your research question by using focus groups, then that is preferable to an inept application of a technically superior method. Generally, poorly done research, of any type, is worse than useless when it leads us to trust false results.

We also have another, and more important, reason for foregoing any summary listing of the circumstances in which one should or should not use focus groups: This would limit our ability to improvise, to be responsive to a particular situation, and to adapt and create a generation of new and better research procedures. Instead, we need to approach the possibility of innovating by assessing the risks that one runs by moving outside the received wisdom. In some situations, it is safer to take more risks and try out unproven approaches; in others the need for a high-quality answer is so great that it is crucial to stick to proven procedures. When innovation is indeed possible, we wholeheartedly encourage it.

Throughout, we have been careful not to assert that there is one right way to apply focus groups. Others may indeed have found ways to get around some of the limitations we have noted. Or they may have capitalized on advantages that we have overlooked. As each of the present authors has learned, however, anyone who proposes new uses for focus groups accepts a certain burden of proof for demonstrating the practical value of these approaches. So we will look forward to the possibility of being proven wrong about any of the lessons that we have gleaned from our own experiences, but we, and the rest of the field, will insist that new approaches be backed by solid evidence of their effectiveness.

The Group Interview in Social Research

JAMES H. FREY
ANDREA FONTANA

Introduction

Discussions of strategies for conducting social research normally focus on two types of data gathering: observation and interviews. In the first case, the researcher assumes one of several roles as a participant observer watching and listening as events unfold and members interact in a setting that is familiar or natural to the persons being observed. In the second case, the researcher asks probing or directed questions that reflect earlier observation or theoretical orientation. In both strategies the individual respondent or participant is the source of data. We suggest that social investigation can be enhanced by employing the group interview technique in which several participants in a social context can be interviewed simultaneously. This technique is not meant to replace the individual interview, but rather group interviewing will

AUTHORS' NOTE: Reprinted by permission from *The Social Science Journal*, Volume 28, Number 2, pages 175-187. Copyright ©1991 by JAI Press. This is a revised version of an article presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Sparks, Nevada, April 1989. The authors would like to thank Peter Adler, Karen Peterson, Eldon Snyder, Elmer Spreitzer, Francesca M. Cancian, and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.

provide data on group interaction, on realities as defined in a group context, and on interpretations of events that reflect group input.

The use of the group interview is not limited to sociologists and anthropologists who are normally associated with the use of qualitative techniques such as participant observation or fieldwork. Political scientists, for example, might use the group interview to assess perceptions of candidates, reactions to political advertising and images, patterns of decision making, views of political and policy issues, or interpretations of questions being prepared for a voter survey. Historians will find the group interview helpful when trying to reconstruct an event or classify the role of a historical figure in that particular event. Policy studies researchers will find the group interview especially helpful in determining the reaction and perception of an affected population to a policy change. Finally, economists interested in marketing and consumer behavior are already making use of group interviews in a variety of ways (e.g., product evaluation and consumer survey pretest). Those who study work environments, job satisfaction, morale, or work behavior can utilize the group interview effectively in their research. Thus the group interview can be of value to social scientists, regardless of discipline. A caveat is in order before proceeding. *Group* is an ambiguous term that could refer to a dyad as well as to a large assembly of respondents. We suspect that the literature has tended to reify methodological techniques and treat these "ideal types" as "real" while in fact ignoring or excluding how the actual interviewing takes place (we would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this point). How many of us have referred to and reported interviews as one on one, totally glossing over the fact that others, friends, family, colleagues, fellow inmates, gang members, team members, fellow workers, and many more, were present and contributed in some fashion to the interview? The caveat in this chapter is that we are not rediscovering the group interview but merely helping it "come out of the closet." The available formats for group interviews will be discussed after a brief review of the use of these interviews in social science.

The Group Interview in Social Science

The use of group interviews dates back to 1926 when Emory Bogardus tested his social distance scale (Bogardus, 1926). Robert Merton and his colleagues also used the group interview in studies of the social effects

of mass communication (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Later Merton adapted the focused interview style to individuals and discovered the role of *psuedogemeinschaft* in the manipulation of group members (Merton, 1987). Harriet Zuckerman (1972) also adapted this focused technique to interviews of Nobel laureates. David L. Morgan and Margaret T. Spanish (1984) and Morgan (1988) have demonstrated the effectiveness of the focus group technique in their studies of health issues.

James D. Thompson and Nicholas J. Demerath (1952) report on experiences with the group interview in their research on management problems in the military. Wendell French, Edward Gross, and Herman Resnick (1986) implemented the group interview technique in a study of faculty reactions to proposed budget cuts in a major university system. In his study of prisons, John Irwin (1970) used group interviews to validate data from one-to-one interviews on criminal careers. James H. Frey and Donald Carns (1988) used group interviews in their study of job satisfaction among casino card dealers. Finally, group interviews of older workers reentering the labor force were used by Frey and Andrea Fontana (1988) to obtain information on motivation to return to work and on the meaning of work to these respondents.

Finally, even though there is some tradition in sociology for the use of the group interview in research, there is almost no reference to it as a data-gathering technique in the literature on field research. Furthermore, classic ethnographic accounts such as the study of street corner groups and gangs by Elliot Liebow (1967) and William F. Whyte (1981) do not make reference to either formal or informal group interviews (Bernard, 1988; Spradley, 1979). We feel that the group interview can be a valuable component of a fieldwork strategy that includes the use of several data-gathering techniques.

The anthropological literature reveals the same pattern—no reference to group interviews. It is possible that field researchers have judged the group interview technique to be inappropriate and invalid. As a result, they have either discarded it as a viable strategy or not utilized it at all because tradition dictates against the use of any field technique other than observation and one-on-one interviews. However, since many field settings naturally lend themselves to the formation of informal and spontaneous groups as well as to formal group organization, we suspect that many field researchers conducted group interviews but did not report these interviews as a component of a field strategy. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski's diaries contain accounts of his conversations with groups of native Trobriand Islanders, but reports of

his research do not explicitly include results from these "interviews" (Malinowski, 1967).

It is obvious that field ethnographers must have encountered respondents in a group setting. Group interviews can take place during any phase of the field investigation process. The discussion that follows will review the conditions or purposes under which group interviews can usefully be conducted.

Purposes

Exploratory

Field research is often utilized for the initial or exploratory phase of a research project. In this phase the researcher is typically looking at a social context that is unfamiliar or new. These studies can be used to satisfy a researcher's curiosity, to arrive at a better understanding of a social context, to test the feasibility of a more complex study, to develop methodological techniques, to identify nuances of a research setting that could impact the investigation, to identify key informants, to add precision to a research problem, and to serve as a source of grounded theory (Babbie, 1989).

Herbert Blumer (1969) recommends bringing together several knowledgeable observers who are familiar with the social situation under investigation into a discussion or resource group. This group "is more valuable many times over than any representative sample" (Blumer, 1969, p. 41). The group discussion will serve to revise or solidify the researcher's image of the reality of a social setting.

Pretest

An extension of the exploratory purpose of a group interview is the use of these groups in pilot testing or pretests. That is, these groups can be used to test various questionnaire items for readability, comprehension, wording, order effects, and response variation. In this case the interview is very structured with specific questions asked. Several risk-perception and risk-assessment scales were tested with a group interview in a study of the impact of a nuclear waste repository (Desvousges & Frey, 1989). Marketing studies frequently use groups to try out items that might be used in questionnaires on consumer preferences or product orientations (Calder, 1977). Less structured interviews are conducted if the goal is

to generate hypotheses or respond to scenarios. In this case the interview is open-ended and the setting can be less formal. It is this application that is most relevant to field research. The researcher can float ideas or thoughts about a social context to spontaneous groups that form in natural field settings (e.g., a street corner or neighborhood tavern) or in a more formal setting (e.g., school or conference room) that is located in the field setting. Of course, group interviews can be used in a posttest context where representatives of the population under study are asked to interpret certain results.

Triangulation

While exploratory and pretest interviews open the way to further research, triangulation aims at providing a larger data base (Denzin, 1989), further decoding and interpretation of data, and additional methodological rigor. Group interview would lend itself very well to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques as well as to the use of "indefinite triangulation" (Cicourel, 1974). Group interview would avail the researcher of the opinions of a large number of subjects in a relatively easy-to-access fashion; it thus would complement any other method being used. It would, on one side, "triangulate" the data of formal methodological techniques by adding to them the human element of the voices of multiple subjects; it would, on the other hand, with the cross-referenced multiple opinions stemming from its group nature, lend methodological rigor to the one-on-one interpretive nature of field interviews and ethnographic reports.

Finally, group interviews would be helpful in the process of "indefinite triangulation." By allowing opinions to bounce back and forth and be modified by the group, rather than being the definitive statement of a single respondent, group interviews would allow us to elaborate statements made and to realize the indexical nature of many statements made by respondents, a technique particularly favored by ethnomethodologists (Cicourel, 1974).

Phenomenology

Group interviews do not have to be provisional or superficial. They can be used as the sole technique for gathering data and then be used for exploratory purposes. According to Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss (1973) the group interview or "multiple respondent" interviews

are effective in settings where the relationships among respondents are complex and views are diverse. They go on to say:

In addition, this form of information gathering provides an especially nice situation for revealing variations in perspective and attitude and a ready means, through subtle pitting of one against the other, for distinguishing between shared and variable perspectives. The pitting process hardly needs manipulation since the hosts themselves, by speech and gesture, will naturally "correct" each other's rendering or "reality." By contrast, in the one-to-one interview the pitting is more calculated, and probably is without any immediate corrective for the respondent. (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 82)

The one-to-one interviews have certain advantages, but researchers can utilize the opportunity to conduct group interviews, either in formal or natural settings, in order to obtain opinion or attitude at another level, (i.e., group consensus or disagreement on reality). Norman Denzin (1989) indicates that groups create their own structure and meaning and a group interview provides access to their level of meaning, in addition to clarifying arguments and revealing diversity in views and opinion.

John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland (1984) suggest group interviews as a supplement to the traditional face-to-face individual interview particularly where the topic is benign and not embarrassing. This type of interview technique can stimulate recall and opinion elaboration. It can also serve to assist the respondent to re-evaluate a previous position or statement that is in need of "amplification, qualification, amendment or contradiction" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 14). In other words, the group interview could be a source of validation, (e.g., interviewing together respondents who have previously been interviewed separately), for previously gathered data via one-on-one interviewing or it could bring the researcher closer to the "truth" by the addition of embellishing interpretive data.

In a discussion of the use of group interviews in marketing research Bobby J. Calder (1977) asserted that this technique is an excellent vehicle to establish what Alfred Schutz (1967) called "intersubjectivity" or ordinary descriptions of reality shared by actors. In a group setting actors are able to obtain feedback on their views of reality; they can respond to other or differing views; and the researcher can vicariously experience a reality in the same manner as the respondent through interaction and unstructured interviewing. In the field, the researcher normally has a personal relationship with those being observed. The

nature of the relationship enables the researcher to share the experience of the observed. When this experience is expressed in the group setting and it adds a dimension to the knowledge of everyday life that the researcher might have overlooked or missed if data gathering had been limited to one-on-one interviews. Finally, it is possible that accounts of reality formation are more likely to be stimulated and to be expressed in greater depth when shared in a group interview format. This possibility should make the utilization of the group as a data-gathering vehicle even more attractive to field workers with a phenomenological research purpose.

Recently, a new trend in field research has emerged, related to the general cultural phenomenon of postmodernism. While postmodernism is too wide and diffuse an approach to be succinctly defined here, its relevance to the social sciences is emerging (Dickens & Fontana, 1992; Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988). Basically, the postmodernist approach in sociology questions the control over the discipline of established paradigms and scrutinizes closely the often self-validating assumptions that underlie these paradigms. Thus postmodernist ethnographers wish to study everyday life accounts by remaining as faithful as possible to the perceptions of the members of the (sub)culture being examined. Specifically, postmodernist ethnographers have been concerned with the overly "authoritative" voice of the ethnographer and with the fact that much of what is reported in field interviews, among other ethnographic procedures, is but the subjective interpretation of the ethnographer (Denzin, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). Postmodernist ethnographers have been suggesting, among other points, that (1) ethnographic accounts be more polyphonic and thus present more of the accounts of the subject studies; and (2) that the role of the ethnographer be "minimized" in the report, to diminish authorial bias and influence.

While group interviews would not eliminate the subjective, interpretive nature of the data, it would help reduce it. Group interviews would be helpful on the two points suggested above. Accounts would be more "polyphonic," as in a collective interview situation; more subjects would participate; and thus a broader spectrum of respondents' opinions would be reported. The interviewer's influence on the interviewee, while not eliminated, would be diffused by the very fact of being in a group rather than in a one-on-one situation.

Dimensions of Group Interviews

The nature of the interview can vary by several dimensions, the most significant of which are the role of the interviewer, the extent to which the questions are preplanned or structured, the purpose of the interview (phenomenological, exploratory, pretest) and the nature of the setting of the interview (i.e., naturally occurring group meeting or a setting formally arranged by researcher). Each is discussed below.

Role of Interviewer

There are essentially two styles that can be assumed by the interviewer. The first calls for a rather passive, nondirective approach where the interviewer-observer only asks enough questions or probes on a limited basis or offers reinforcement to keep a discussion going. In this case the interview may be exploratory or phenomenological where unstructured questioning is employed. This type of interviewing is more plausible in a setting that is informal or naturally occurring. The other side of the interviewer's role is directive or active. In this situation the interviewer is very involved with the direction of the interview either as an active and empathetic participant in the interview or as someone who exercises considerable control over the direction of the interview by administering a structured and ordered set of items or by constantly keeping the group on track. This role is more readily implemented in formal, nonnatural settings.

Question Structure

The purpose of the interview will dictate the question format. In exploratory and phenomenological groups, unstructured, open-end questions are normally implemented. This permits greater flexibility in response patterns and probe tactics. Unstructured questioning is easily implemented in field settings where naturally occurring groups form on a spontaneous basis. However, formally arranged settings, either in the field or at another location, can also be the site of the administration of an unstructured questionnaire guide. In other words, setting is not a limitation to the unstructured interview. The preplanned structured interview can be administered in formal settings quite easily, but is difficult to implement in informal, spontaneous settings. The pretest

Table 2.1 Purposes of Group Interviews

Exploratory	Develop familiarity, test methodological techniques, understand setting, formulate hypotheses, identify informal respondents
Pretest	Test questionnaire items, assess product or advertising reactions, try ideas or interpretations on relevant group
Triangulation	Uses multiple methods to enhance validity
Phenomenological	Determine meanings on another level beyond one-to-one, elaboration, learn polyphonic accounts

purpose lends itself more readily to structured interviewing; exploratory and phenomenological do not.

Purpose of Interview

The distinctions among purposes have been described earlier. Exploratory group interviews can be conducted in either informal, natural settings or in formal, arranged settings. Pretest interviews are best conducted in formal settings arranged by the interviewer who is actively administering a structured interview schedule. Phenomenological interviews can be conducted in naturally occurring settings provided the group can maintain itself for a lengthy time period and distractions can be monitored.

Setting of the Interview

Marketing research has institutionalized a tradition of group interviewing called the focus group, which takes place in a formal, prearranged setting, usually a room for 8-12 persons sitting around a conference table while being observed via a one-way mirror or being audio and/or video taped. The interviewer is usually directive by administering a structured or partially structured question format for pretest or exploratory purposes. This experience would be difficult, but not impossible, to duplicate in a field setting. It is possible that a field researcher could arrange for a group interview in a setting that is natural to a field location. The back room of a tavern, the lounge of a public agency, or the home of a key informant represent potential locations where exploratory and phenomenological interviews could take place.

The most frequently occurring opportunity for a group interview in the field will probably be the situation where two or more members of the population under study will gather in a spontaneous manner at a familiar field location such as a street corner, a coffee shop, a tavern, a park, a work setting, or a playground. Stephen Lyng and David Snow report success with group interviews of skydivers at a natural setting where these participants gathered after jumps:

These informal gatherings (bars and restaurants) proved to be a rich source of data, since it was here that jumpers most often expressed their feelings and ideas about their sport. (Lyng & Snow, 1986, p. 163)

We feel that these informal group gatherings provide an excellent occasion for the interviewer to engage the group, probably in an initially directive way, but evolving to a passive, enabling role, with questions. These would usually be unstructured in format. The normal reaction of a field worker is to simply observe the group interaction and to listen to the dialogue. We recommend that, where and when the field worker deems it appropriate, the group be approached with questions. The key is to be able to recognize when these situations occur and how to best manage them when they do.

These dimensions are reflected in the various types of group interviews that have been implemented in research. Some of these types are applicable to field research, others are not.

Types of Group Interviews

Focus Group

The focus group interview has been adopted as a major data-gathering technique by market researchers who are interested in the appeal of advertising strategies or in consumer product preferences (Axelrod, 1975). This technique has also been used by social scientists as an aid to questionnaire development (Desvousges & Frey, 1989) and as part of program evaluation (Krueger, 1988). The focus group developed in response to dissatisfaction with polling techniques and as an extension of the group therapy methods employed by psychiatrists (Bellenger, Barnhardt, & Goldstucker, 1976). A focus group interview is a qualitative

Table 2.2 Group Interview Dimensions

Interviewer Role	Directive	Nondirective
Question Format	Structured	Unstructured
Purpose	Exploratory, pretest	Phenomenological
Setting	Formal	Natural

research technique that includes 8-10 persons brought to a centralized location to respond to questions on a topic of particular interest to a sponsor or client (Greenbaum, 1988). The interview is led by a "moderator" who keeps the respondents "focused" on a particular topic. The focus group is generally conducted for applied purposes and, therefore, would be classified as a pretest vehicle. It is ordinarily conducted in a setting formally established for the interview; the moderator is directive, and the interview questions are purposive and usually somewhat structured. Merton and his associates (1956) implemented a version of this technique. Some researchers advocate focus groups (Morgan, 1988), but we propose that the focus group is just one form of group interview that is feasible for use in field research. The focus group interview has limited usefulness as a field technique, although it might be utilized by a field worker in a natural setting that allowed for separation or isolation from the other ongoing activity of the field context.

Brainstorming

This technique is most often used to generate new ideas. The interviewer simply tosses out an idea or thought, and the group members respond to each other as the idea is evaluated. It is conducted in formal or natural settings, the purpose is largely exploratory, the interviewer's role is passive, and there is no structure to the questioning. This approach could be used in the field, but without some interviewer control a high rate of trivial or unusable data can be a problem. In addition, responses tend to be insightful but superficial. Brainstorming may be a good field strategy for initial stages of a group interview, or it may be a technique to determine if a naturally occurring group has a potential for a more structured, but still informal, group interview.

Nominal and Delphi Groups

Techniques of group interviewing where the participants are physically isolated but their observations are shared through a coordinator have almost no place in fieldwork, but they can be of value to researchers with other purposes in mind. In each case there is high task orientation; interaction among members is minimized or nonexistent; the researcher plays a dominant, assertive role; interpersonal dynamics are minimized; and questioning is normally structured. The Delphi technique, which relies on mail questionnaires, is especially time-consuming. Neither is able to fulfill phenomenological purposes but can be used for pretest and exploratory research. However, both techniques have been used effectively in decision-making studies and in policy formation deliberations. The Delphi technique is especially useful in studies that require the participation of a geographically dispersed population such as managers or executives of international corporations.

Natural and Formal Field Interview

Group interviews in the field can take place in two ways. First, the field worker can interview groups as they spontaneously form in a natural location in the field setting. Instead of simply observing these groups and inquiring about the content of the interaction in a one-to-one interview with each participant, the interviewer can enter the group and pose questions. This may be done once observation is no longer productive and the interviewer has established rapport. By virtue of entering the group and asking the questions the field worker has altered the "natural" status of the group. Yet, that might be a sufficient price to pay in return for the additional data that can be generated as a result of a multiple-interview opportunity. The informal, natural group interview is an excellent technique for exploratory queries on interpretations of previously gathered data, and it can be a validity check on information gathered in a one-to-one interview. Informal interviews can be a way to check for bias in data collected in other ways (Moeller, Mescher, More, & Shafter, 1980). Additional phenomenological insight is a possibility but, more often than not, the setting may not be conducive for an in-depth, probing interview that requires conflict and emotion to be expressed. The phenomenological purpose may better be articulated

in the formal group interview where the field worker is able to arrange for a group of respondents to meet in a location within the field setting that can accommodate several persons and that is free of distractions. In this setting the researcher is freer to ask probing questions, to allow interpersonal dynamics to play out to their fullest extent, and to become an empathetic observer. This type of interview also makes it possible for the interviewer to play a more directive role and it certainly will solidify and legitimate the researcher's role in the field setting.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Group interviewing is a research technique that takes advantage of group dynamics to produce new and additional data. In addition to the respondent-interviewer relationship, the evolving relations among group members can be a stimulus to elaboration and expression. An additional phenomenological dimension is added to the interpretation and understanding of an event, activity, or behavioral pattern that has taken place in the field. In fact, group interviews can be a source of validation for events observed and for individual interview data.

Group interviews are also less costly than the more traditional face-to-face variety simply because more persons are interviewed in the same time frame. Group interviews are efficient in the sense that the interviewer-respondent relation can be prolonged or is less likely to be bogged down because the group members will stimulate each other. There is nothing more frustrating to an interviewer than to be a victim of a recalcitrant respondent. The group interview is an excellent mechanism for bringing the researcher closer to even more respondents, it is flexible, and it permits considerable probing (Wells, 1979). The group interview can provide some insight for the field worker, into the nature of relationships in the field (e.g., power differential or friendship patterns) that might otherwise not have been discernible through observation or interviews. The group interview process is, in itself, revealing on this account (Goldman, 1962). The nonverbal actions of the respondents plus the substance of the relations of group members can tell the field researcher a great deal about social relations that exist beyond the group. Thus the group interview can provide a greater depth of understanding about the field context and about relations of the members of a particular setting. Not only do group interviews take advantage of group dynamics, provide insight into social relationships in the field,

Table 2.3 Type of Group Interviews and Dimension

<i>Type</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Role of Interviewer</i>	<i>Question Format</i>
Focus group	Formal-preset	Directive	Structured
Brainstorming	Formal or informal	Nondirective	Very unstructured
Nominal/Delphi	Formal	Directive	Structured
Field, natural	Informal, spontaneous	Moderately nondirective	Very unstructured
Field, formal	Preset, but in field	Somewhat directive	Semistructured

reduce distance between researcher and the social context, and reduce total cost, but this type of interview can stimulate new ideas, identify language or symbols not previously acknowledged, serve as a testing ground for hypotheses or analytic suggestions, and expand the depth and variation in response or description of relevant social events.

Plans to implement the group interview technique call for nothing different in strategies for entering the field and establishing rapport. These strategies are the same for one-to-one interviews or group interviews. The requirements of objectivity, reliability, and validity are also the same. In fact, these may be enhanced by the utilization of a group interview technique. The only factor that is different is that the field worker be sensitive to natural groupings and be able to take advantage of these whether they occur in spontaneous settings or are arranged for a location familiar to field respondents.

There are some problems with group interviews. First, group interviews require different skills than do individual interviews. The field worker must be sensitive to group dynamics such as how the opinions of one member can sway others or to how relations outside the group influence response patterns within the group or how size effects response patterns. This is especially crucial since the group members will probably know each other and will have already established a patterned relationship. Only a few researchers will have the sensitivity to group processes that will make them eligible to conduct group interviews since social scientists are not routinely "trained" in interviewing in their graduate school experience.

On a more practical side, locations conducive to group interviews may not exist, natural groupings may not develop, and if they do form, the researcher may not be permitted access to the group, particularly if that group has established a history of getting together. It may be very difficult, for example, for a researcher to be accepted into a regular poker-playing group or a group that meets at coffee break. In addition, group responses can be affected by the size of the group, by the group members' view of the purpose of the interview, and by the differences in background of the members. In fact, group interviews, particularly the natural and focus groups, may experience the pressure to conformity (Isenberg, 1986); individuals may be stifled rather than stimulated by the group; there may be a higher ratio of interpersonal conflict in interacting groups, and this could drain the response energy of the group; the production of irrelevant data may be high; posturing by members of the group could create a level of false information or awareness of the research problem; and the outcome of the interview could very possibly be biased by the interviewer's role in the group.

If the group interview is employed, some of the flexibility in the observer role is compromised. The covert role is virtually impossible to implement, and the peripheral member role may be all that is possible since the role of interviewer requires some coordinating and directing (Adler & Adler, 1987). Thus the field researcher who implements group interviews will need to employ a more active membership role if intense phenomenological interviewing is required, but the less active role facilitates organizing informal spontaneous group interviews.

Conclusion

The group interview is a tool that social researchers should consider utilizing, particularly as a strategy to obtain phenomenological data in natural settings. The sole purpose of this technique is not limited to exploratory inquiry or to the development of procedures and questionnaire items for subsequent quantitative studies. It is a technique that can stand alone as a procedure for obtaining data on any social context that is being studied in an ethnographic manner. Finally, we do not propose that the group interview be a substitute for the traditional one-on-one interview. Rather, the group interview should be considered for use along with other techniques of interviewing and observation.

The Design and Analysis of Focus Group Studies

A Practical Approach

JOHN KNODEL

Practitioners of modern social science research are increasingly recognizing the value of focus group methodology to collect qualitative data either for its own right or to be used in conjunction with quantitative data. There is already a substantial literature on how to conduct focus groups, based largely on marketing research experience (e.g., Greenbaum, 1987). Far less has been written about how to design focus group studies and analyze their results, especially within the framework of social science research (but see Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This chapter provides a practical approach to design and analysis.

Designing a Focus Group Study

As with other approaches to studying social phenomena, designing a focus group study requires careful thought and reflection. Given that focus groups can be used for a variety of purposes within social science research, the design of a focus group study will depend on its purpose. At one extreme, maximum flexibility may be desired; the number of groups to be held and even the precise characteristics of the populations to be targeted are decided in a stepwise fashion as the fieldwork