

FOCUS GROUPS AS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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determine which forms of group interview are or are not focus groups. My own preference (Morgan, 1996) is for a more inclusive approach that broadly defines focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher's interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction.

One reason for favoring an inclusive approach is that the exclusive approaches do not really exclude very much. Other than focus groups, the primary categories of group interviews in the existing typologies are things that are manifestly different from focus groups. On the one hand, there are nominal groups and Delphi groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), which do not involve actual group interaction. On the other hand, there is the observation of naturally occurring groups, which typically do not involve the researcher in determining the topic of discussion. Thus, little is gained by excluding these categories of data collection because they already fall outside the broad definition of focus groups offered here.

Among the more specific criteria that could be used to distinguish focus groups from other types of group interviews, both Frey and Fontana (1989) and Khan and Manderson (1992) assert that focus groups are more formal. In particular, they argue that focus groups are likely to involve inviting participants to the discussion and they also stress the distinctive role of the moderator. Although there is no doubt that group interviews vary along a continuum from more formally structured interaction to more informal gatherings, I do not believe it is possible to draw a line between formal and informal group interviews in a way that defines some as focus groups and others as something else. Instead, I find it more useful to think that the degree of formal structure in a focus group is a decision that the research makes according to the specific purposes of the research project. In particular, the use of either a more formal or a less formal approach will depend on the researcher's goals, the nature of the research setting, and the likely reaction of the participants to the research topic.

Among the other criteria that have been offered as distinguishing features of focus groups are their size and the use of specialized facilities for the interview (McQuarrie, 1996). Again, however, these supposedly exclusive criteria are mostly a matter of degree. Who is to say when a group is too large or too small to be called a focus group or when a setting is too casual to qualify? Rather than generate pointless debates about what is or is not a focus group, I prefer to treat focus groups as a "broad umbrella" or "big tent" that can include many different variations. Of course, this approach requires researchers to make choices about doing focus groups

one way rather than another. Fortunately, this need to make explicit decisions about data collection strategies is a familiar concern to social scientists, and it comes under the heading of "research design." As social scientists have gained increasing experience with focus groups, we also have produced insights into the situations in which different research designs are either more or less likely to be effective (e.g., Krueger, 1993; Morgan, 1992a, 1995).

Overview of the Remainder of This Book

The ultimate goal of this book is to provide the motivated reader with the wherewithal to conduct effective focus group research. Although a slim volume such as this cannot produce "instant experts," it can provide a basis for growth in an area that resembles many things we already do. Much of what goes into conducting focus groups touches on the same issues that arise in any effort to collect qualitative data. Thus, a continuing theme of this book is that those of us who become focus group researchers are simply occupying a natural niche within the well-defined territory of qualitative research methodology.

The next chapter compares focus groups to the two most common means of gathering qualitative data—individual interviewing and participant observation—and uses this comparison to locate the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups. Chapter 3 presents a variety of different applications for focus groups as a research technique, both as a self-contained means of collecting data and in combination with other methods. Chapter 4 covers the technical aspects involved in planning and designing focus groups. That chapter and the next provide a thorough treatment of the practical issues involved in focus groups, and Chapter 5 presents the fundamental options in conducting focus groups. Chapter 6 examines a variety of additional possibilities that go beyond the basic format. The concluding chapter returns to the theme of focus groups as a qualitative method to look at the potential contributions of this new method to social science research.

2. FOCUS GROUPS AS A QUALITATIVE METHOD

At present, the two principal means of collecting qualitative data in the social sciences are participant observation, which typically occurs in groups, and open-ended interviews, which typically occur with individuals.

As group interviews, focus groups not only occupy an intermediate position between these other qualitative methods but also possess a distinctive identity of their own. On the one hand, focus groups cannot really substitute for the kinds of research that are already done well by either individual interviews or participant observation. On the other hand, focus groups provide access to forms of data that are not obtained easily with either of the other two methods. In this context, it becomes particularly important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups and to do so in comparison to other qualitative methods. This chapter will first compare focus groups to participant observation and individual interviews and then present an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups as a qualitative method.

Compared to Participant Observation

The main advantage of focus groups in comparison to participant observation is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time based on the researcher's ability to assemble and direct the focus group sessions. This control is also a disadvantage, however, because it means that focus groups are in some sense unnatural social settings. Like Gamson (1992), I feel that any intrusion of human observers in a research setting means that we can only talk about the degree to which we are observing a naturalistic setting. Still, my sense is that the degree of naturalism in most participant observation studies is higher than the degree of naturalism in most focus group studies.

What are the actual advantages to observing interaction in naturalistic settings? Three major advantages of naturalistic observation are (a) an ability to collect data on a larger range of behaviors, (b) a greater variety of interactions with the study participants, and (c) a more open discussion of the research topic. By comparison, focus groups are (a) limited to verbal behavior, (b) consist only of interaction in discussion groups, and (c) are created and managed by the researcher.

First, like all forms of interviews, focus groups are largely limited to verbal behavior and self-reported data. If the goal is to collect data on other social actions, rather than just the discussion of these activities, then the increased naturalism of participant observation is necessary. Second, even if focus groups do bring group interaction into the picture, there are still many interactions that cannot be re-created in focus groups. If the interaction of interest does not consist of a "discussion," then more naturalistic observation is probably preferable. Finally, because the discussions in

focus groups are controlled by the researcher, we can never be sure of how natural the interactions are. If the topic of interest demands relatively uncontaminated statements of the research participants' experiences and perspectives, then participant observation is the closest approximation to this degree of naturalness.

Although the great strength of participant observation, in comparison to focus groups, consists of more naturalistic observations, its comparative weakness is the difficulty in locating and gaining access to settings in which a substantial set of observations can be collected on the topic of interest. A good example is the research that I did with Margaret Spanish on perceptions of heart attack risk factors (Morgan & Spanish, 1985). What we had in mind was a group of people gathered around a lunch table discussing their surprise over a mutual friend's heart attack, an image that we labeled "Oh my God, not Harry!" Certainly, such interaction occurs, but where could we find the opportunity to observe it? By conducting focus groups, we admittedly had to sacrifice the immediacy and emotion of a naturally occurring episode such as the lunch conversation, but this was not really a loss because we could not "sacrifice" what we never had access to in the first place.

There is a more subtle implication to the value of focus groups in research areas in which a dense set of observations is difficult to locate: We tend to do participant observation in settings in which there is something immediately available to observe. For example, it is easily feasible to do participant observation studies about patients recovering from heart attacks using doctors and hospitals as a point of access. One reason that topics such as social roles and formal organizations are so frequently studied by participant observation is that they are structurally well suited to the method. Of course, the fundamental importance of roles and organizations to social theory is also a factor. More social psychological topics such as attitudes and decision making, however, appear to be slighted in participant observation not because they are less important but because they are less well suited to observation.

Because both focus groups and participant observation share an overlapping interest in group interaction, there are many topics where it would be possible to design a study using either of them. In this case, there is a trade-off—between the naturalness of observations in a field setting and the ability to collect a concentrated set of interactions in a very short span of time via focus groups. This is not the kind of choice that can be made on strictly technical grounds. The different value attached to the advantages and disadvantages of the two methods will depend on the research topic

itself, the background and interests of the researcher, and the nature of the ultimate audience for the research. Put simply, where there is a premium on the naturalistic ability to observe group behavior and where the opportunity to observe such behavior is readily available, some form of participant observation will be preferred over focus groups.

Taken together, these various comparisons suggest division of labor between participant observation and focus groups. Participant observation will always have an advantage when it is necessary to observe behaviors in their natural context, and especially when it is necessary to follow these behaviors in-depth over time. Thus, for purposes such as ethnography, focus groups may play a supplementary role, but they certainly will not supplant participant observation as the primary tool for the investigation of broad aspects of culture. There are many other situations, however, in which full-scale participant observation study would be either impractical or inefficient. With regard to practicality, some processes, such as attitude formation and decision making, are inherently unobservable, and some kinds of behaviors are either too private or habit-ridden to offer much opportunity for meaningful observation. With regard to efficiency, there are many topics in which the effort required by participant observation would be excessive or in which here the need for rapid data gathering would supersede the need for the depth and detail of participant observation. In each of these cases, focus groups could well be the preferred method.

Compared to Individual Interviews

The comparative advantage of focus groups as an interview technique lies in their ability to observe interaction on a topic. Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee. This reliance on group interaction, however, also means that individual interviews have clear advantages over focus groups with regard to (a) the amount of control that the interviewer has and (b) the greater amount of information that each informant has time to share. By comparison, focus groups (a) require greater attention to the role of the moderator and (b) provide less depth and detail about the opinions and experiences of any given participant.

The advantages that individual interviews offer in terms of control stem from closer communication between interviewer and informant. Interviewers can thus typically use more subtle cues to control the direction of

one-on-one conversations compared to what is necessary to guide a group discussion. Furthermore, Agar and MacDonald (1995) argue that the dynamics of individual interviews put more burden on the informants to explain themselves to the interviewer so that the elaboration of initial statements often occurs with relatively little input from the interviewer. By comparison, focus groups may confront the researcher with a choice between either giving control to the group and possibly hearing less about the topic of interest or taking direct control over the group, and possibly losing the free-flowing discussion that was the original intent of the group interview.

Issues of control over the interview, however, can sometimes favor focus groups. In particular, group discussions make it easier to conduct "less structured interviews" (see Chapter 4) in which there is no preconstructed interview guideline or questionnaire. This ability to give the group control over the direction of the interview is especially useful in exploratory research in which the researcher may not initially even know what questions to ask. Although individual interviews can be adapted to let participants determine the direction of the interview (e.g., Spradley, 1979), the ability to turn the interaction in the interview over to the participants themselves provides focus groups with a particular strength in this regard.

The other distinct advantage of individual interviews occurs when the goal of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of a person's opinions and experiences. A 90-minute focus group discussion among 8 to 10 participants will, of necessity, generate roughly a tenth of the information that each participant would provide in an equivalently long individual interview. Therefore, when the goal is to learn about each informant in detail, the individual interview has an obvious advantage. Similarly, when the goal is to learn about the biographical details of a person's life, this argues for the continuity and completeness of the narrative that individual interviews produce.

Interestingly, issues of depth can sometimes favor focus groups. In particular, the individual interview's ability to produce greater depth and continuity is based on an assumption that the informant in fact has more to say. Interestingly, focus groups may have an advantage for topics that are either habit-ridden or not thought out in detail. For example, I once watched a marketer with a background in sociology conduct a lively demonstration focus group of professors and graduate students who discussed their use of bar soap. As an individual interview topic, it would require considerable skill to get an informant to talk about this topic for any length such as an hour. A more relevant example of this principle comes from my research

on heart attacks (Morgan & Spanish, 1985). We explicitly sought out age groups that would not have thought very much about what causes or prevents heart attacks. The participants' discussions, however, quickly revealed that they had a range of different thoughts about this topic, which led to a very productive discussion about their agreements and disagreements.

In comparing focus groups and individual interviews, a crucial question is whether the two methods produce similar data. Unfortunately, this topic has been the subject of more speculation (e.g., Agar & MacDonald, 1995) than systematic research. Merton et al. (1990) proposed a useful research design for addressing this issue by interviewing people with both methods, with one half of the sample talking about the topic first in group interviews and then individually and the other half starting with individual interviews. Wight (1994) appears to be the only researcher who has actually followed such a design—in a study of how adolescent males talked about their relations with the opposite sex. He found that when the young men began with focus groups, they voiced a set of boisterous and “macho” claims that they continued to express in subsequent individual interviews. In contrast, a second set of young men who participated in the individual interviews first tended to present themselves as more sensitive to the women's point of view, but this supposed sensitivity disappeared when these youths participated in subsequent group interviews. In other words, three of the four combinations produced a macho response, with the “sensitive” response only appearing in initial individual interviews.

The possibility that individual and group interviews will produce different results immediately raises issues of validity: If the two methods produce different results, then one of them must be wrong. Is this really so? Consider Wight's (1994) results: It seems quite likely that adolescent males will express rather different thoughts about the opposite sex in private than among a group of their peers. In particular, young men may well be capable of both more sensitive and more macho approaches, depending on the context. In reviewing Wight's work, as well as related data of her own, Kitzinger (1994a, 1994b) reached the conclusion that such comparisons of individual and group interviews may be as much about context as validity. Thus, if people actually do act differently in groups than they do alone or in dyads, then group and individual interviews will necessarily demonstrate rather different aspects of the overall behavior pattern.

One answer to this dilemma is to note that an interest in individual behavior might not be well served by data from group interviews. Similarly, a research interest in group behavior might not be well served by data from

individual interviews. Most research, however, does not involve topics that can be neatly divided into purely individual or purely group behavior. Therefore, we need to know more about the differences in the content of interviews that may arise from conducting them in dyadic versus group contexts. Sadly, with only one or two studies that provide thorough comparisons of individual and group interviews, it is hard to say much about when such differences in context might lead to differences in results—let alone what the exact nature of those differences might be. Because the question of which method is preferable in which circumstances is essentially an empirical one, it will take more research using both techniques to provide an answer. Only then will we be able to provide useful advice about the topic of the research that might influence the choice of individual interviews or focus groups. With that additional knowledge, we should be better able to make choices about when to use either individual or group interviews or a judicious combination of the two (see Chapter 3).

Strengths and Weaknesses

Pulling together the various strands from these discussions reveals a pattern of strengths and weaknesses for focus groups as a technique for collecting qualitative data. Focus groups are no different from any other method, qualitative or quantitative, in this regard—there are some cases in which they will be preferred and others in which they should be avoided. This summary will argue that both the strengths and the weaknesses of focus groups flow directly from their two defining features: the reliance on the researcher's focus and the group's interaction.

The strength of relying on the researcher's focus is the ability to produce concentrated amounts of data on precisely the topic of interest. This strength was clear in comparison to participant observation because focus groups not only give access to reports on a wide range of topics that may not be observable but also ensure that the data will be directly targeted to the researcher's interests. This strength is one source of focus groups' reputation for being “quick and easy.” The other source of this reputation is their relative efficiency in comparison to individual interviews, at least in terms of gathering equivalent amounts of data.

Some accounts of focus groups' ability to gather data efficiently make it sound as if they have an almost magical “synergy” that makes them superior to individual interviews. My own preference is to be much more explicit about the aspects of group interaction that can provide insights into participants' opinions and experiences (see Chapter 3; Morgan, 1996;

Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Furthermore, the one study (Fern, 1982) that has used a controlled experiment to compare individual interviews and focus groups showed that group interviews did not produce significantly more or better ideas than an equivalent number of individual interviews. As Fern notes, however, other claims about the supposed superiority of group interaction for purposes other than "idea generation" remain untested—and some are so vague as to be untestable.

A more concrete demonstration of the strength that focus groups offer through concentrated observations on the researcher's interests is the conclusion that two eight-person focus groups would produce as many ideas as 10 individual interviews (Fern, 1982). Given the amount of time that it would take not only to conduct 10 interviews but also to analyze them, working with two focus groups would clearly be more efficient. That does not mean, however, that focus group projects are uniformly easier to accomplish than gathering the equivalent amount of data with individual interviews. Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, and O'Connor (1993) point out that logistical factors are often the critical consideration. For example, it may not be practical for some participants to travel to a focus group, or it may be very difficult to assemble enough of the right people for a group. Therefore, there are a number of circumstances in which the logistics would make it more efficient to do individual rather than group interviews.

The fact that focus groups are driven by the researcher's interests can also be a source of weakness, however. The fact that the researcher creates and directs the groups makes them distinctly less naturalistic than participant observation so there is always some residual uncertainty about the accuracy of what the participants say. In particular, there is a very real concern that the moderator, in the name of maintaining the interview's focus, will influence the group's interactions. This problem is hardly unique to focus groups because the researcher influences all but the most unobtrusive social science methods. In reality, there is no hard evidence that the focus group moderator's impact on the data is any greater than the researcher's impact in participant observation or individual interviewing. Indeed, the dyadic nature of individual interviewing would seem to create at least as many opportunities for researcher influence. My own sense is that what makes the issue of the researcher's influence on the data so prominent in focus groups is the moderator's heightened visibility in conducting the interview as opposed to the tendency to remove the interviewer from many accounts of individual interviewing. The researcher's influence on the data, however, is an issue in almost all qualitative research, and those who rely on focus groups must attend to it because it does affect

the quality of the data. Even if the concern about the influence of focus group moderators is unreasonably magnified, it is one of those perceptions that can be "real in its consequences"; therefore, focus group researchers must be prepared to respond to this potential criticism.

The second broad source of strength for focus groups is their reliance on interaction in the group to produce the data. As Morgan and Krueger (1993) note, the comparisons that participants make among each other's experiences and opinions are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviors and motivations. Furthermore, in an era when issues of consensus and diversity are of intense interest to social scientists, the discussions in focus groups can provide direct data on these exact issues.

This too produces a corresponding weakness, however, because the group itself may influence the nature of the data it produces. The question of how interacting in a group influences what each individual will contribute to the group is a classic issue in social psychology (e.g., Janis, 1982). The concerns for focus groups include both a tendency toward conformity, in which some participants withhold things that they might say in private, and a tendency toward "polarization," in which some participants express more extreme views in a group than in private (Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, & Flay, 1991). As noted previously, the differences between dyadic interviews versus moderated group discussions is an area that requires much more exploration. It is clear, however, that for some types of participants discussing some types of topics, the presence of a group will affect what they say and how they say it. This is an inevitable aspect of focus groups that should be considered as a potential source of weakness for any given research project.

The group's influence on the discussion can also raise questions about the ability of any particular set of participants to discuss a particular topic. One set of problems involves topics in which the participants' level of involvement is either too low or too high. If the participants have little involvement with a topic, the researcher may collect only scattered instances of the desired material, but if the participants are highly involved with the topic the moderator may have to work hard to control the discussion. A related set of problems arise if the topic is highly controversial or if there is a real potential for disagreement among the participants. This should not, however, leave the impression that topics for focus groups are limited to bland discussions about common topics. In fact, focus groups are routinely used to discuss issues such as family planning (e.g., Knodel et al. 1984) and sexually transmitted diseases (O'Brien, 1993). One simple way to determine whether a topic will work in a focus group setting is to

pretest. In this case, the "tone" of the group discussions provides clues about the appropriateness of focus groups. Fortunately, social scientists have taken on the task of investigating the issues involved in working with sensitive topics, especially when cultural differences may be important (e.g., Jarrett, 1993). We have much to learn, however, about the range of practical topics for focus groups, and only further experience will provide better insights into this issue.

Summarizing the strengths of focus groups, we find that what they do best is produce an opportunity to collect data from groups discussing topics of interest to the researcher. This combination of strengths is notably different from the strengths of either participant observation or individual interviews. Because the researcher defines the discussion topics, focus groups are more controlled than participation observation, and because of the participant-defined nature of group interaction the focus group setting is less controlled than individual interviewing. Morgan and Spanish (1984) noted that this compromise between the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the other two techniques bears a resemblance to Howard Becker's (1958) two dimensions for classifying qualitative data. On the first dimension, Becker distinguishes between data that are volunteered by informants and data that are requested by the researcher. The second dimension distinguishes whether the data are publicly presented in the presence of other informants or shared with the researcher alone. The naturalistic advantage of participant observation is that it produces volunteered information in groups, whereas individual interviews emphasize the control available through private contact between the researcher and the participant.

In the case of focus groups, the typical presence of the researcher as a moderator in a focused discussion of a preselected topic means that the data lean toward the researcher-directed and publicly stated poles of the continuum. Focus groups thus offer something of a compromise between the strengths of participant observation and individual interviewing. As a compromise between the strengths and weaknesses of these other two qualitative techniques, focus groups are not as strong as either of them is within their specialized domain. The respective weaknesses of participant observation and individual interviewing, however, allow focus groups to operate across traditional boundaries. This flexibility may be the greatest strength of focus groups. None of this, however, is meant to overstate the strengths of focus groups and, given their potential weaknesses, there are many cases in which focus groups would not be the preferred method.

Summing Up

The issues raised in this chapter really respond to two separate questions. First, when are focus groups a workable alternative for a given research project? Second, given that they are at least possible, when are they actually to be preferred over other qualitative methods?

The simplest test of whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project is to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest. If there are barriers to active and easy interaction, this may be overcome by some of the discussion techniques described in later chapters. In such a case, it would be wise to build backup data collection strategies into the research design. If researchers use focus groups and are disappointed by the results, however, then it is vital that they find a forum for saying so. At this point, the field of social science focus groups cannot grow without a few public accounts of cases in which focus groups were tried and found inappropriate (e.g., Agar & MacDonald, 1995).

Saying that focus groups are a workable option for a research project is not at all the same as saying that they are the preferred way to gather the data for that project. One goal of this chapter has been the forthright recognition that there are many circumstances in which a different form of qualitative research will produce data that are more appropriate to the researcher's goals. In the same spirit, I have also claimed that there are other circumstances in which focus groups would in fact be preferable to either participant observation or individual interviews. The most basic implication of this argument is that focus groups expand our options when it comes to matching our research questions to qualitative methods.

3. THE USES OF FOCUS GROUPS

This chapter will present focus groups as both a self-contained research method and a technique that can be used in conjunction with other methods. As a self-contained method, focus groups can either explore new research areas or examine well-known research questions from the research participants' own perspective. In combination with other methods, focus groups can provide preliminary research on specific issues in a larger project or follow up research to clarify findings from another method.

Although qualitative researchers in the social sciences have little difficulty with the idea that focus groups can be used as a self-contained means