

FOCUS GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, focus groups and group interviews have reemerged as a popular technique for gathering qualitative data, both among sociologists and across a wide range of academic and applied research areas. Focus groups are currently used as both a self-contained method and in combination with surveys and other research methods, most notably individual, in-depth interviews. Comparisons between focus groups and both surveys and individual interviews help to show the specific advantages and disadvantages of group interviews, concentrating on the role of the group in producing interaction and the role of the moderator in guiding this interaction. The advantages of focus groups can be maximized through careful attention to research design issues at both the project and the group level. Important future directions include: the development of standards for reporting focus group research, more methodological research on focus groups, more attention to data analysis issues, and more engagement with the concerns of the research participants.

INTRODUCTION

Although some form of group interviewing has undoubtedly existed for as long as sociologists have been collecting data (e.g. Bogardus 1926), the past decade has produced a remarkable surge of interest in group interviews generally and focus groups in particular. Much of this interest first surfaced in the mid-1980s. In 1987, Robert Merton published remarks that compared his pioneering work on "focused interviews" (Merton & Kendall 1946) with marketers' uses of the focus group, while John Knodel and his collaborators (Knodel et al 1987) published a summary of their focus group research on demographic changes in Thailand. The next year produced two book-length treatments of focus groups

by social scientists (Krueger 1988/1994, Morgan 1988). This initial burst of interest was followed by other texts (Stewart & Shamdasani 1990, Vaughn et al 1996), a reissuing of Merton et al's original manual (Merton et al 1956/1990), an edited collection of more advanced material (Morgan 1993a), and at least two special issues of journals (Carey 1995, Knodel 1995).

The current level of interest in focus group interviews is evident from searches of *Sociological Abstracts*, *Psychological Abstracts*, and the *Social Science Citation Index*. All of these sources show a steady growth in research using focus groups, indicating that well over a hundred empirical articles using focus groups appeared in refereed journals during 1994 alone. These searches also show interesting patterns in the use of focus groups. In particular, a content analysis of the materials from *Sociological Abstracts* revealed that over 60% of the empirical research using focus groups during the past decade combined them with other research methods, although the proportion of studies that rely solely on focus groups has been increasing in recent years. Hence, this review pays attention to uses of focus groups both as a "self-contained" method and in combination with other methods. Before examining the uses of focus groups, however, I examine how focus groups are related to group interviews in general.

FOCUS GROUPS AND GROUP INTERVIEWS

This chapter defines focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. This definition has three essential components. First, it clearly states that focus groups are a research method devoted to data collection. Second, it locates the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data. Third, it acknowledges the researcher's active role in creating the group discussion for data collection purposes.

While this definition is intentionally quite broad, each of its three elements does exclude some projects that have occasionally been called focus groups. First, focus groups should be distinguished from groups whose primary purpose is something other than research; alternative purposes might be: therapy, decision making, education, organizing, or behavior change (although focus groups that are primarily for data collection may have some of these outcomes as well). Second, it is useful to distinguish focus groups from procedures that utilize multiple participants but do not allow interactive discussions, such as nominal groups and Delphi groups (these techniques are reviewed in Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). Finally, focus groups should be distinguished from methods that collect data from naturally occurring group discussions where no one acts as an interviewer. The distinction here is not whether the group existed prior to the research, but whether the researcher's interests directed the discussion,

since focus groups are often conducted with existing groups (Morgan 1989).

Lying behind this effort to define focus groups is the fundamental question of whether focus groups should be distinguished from other types of group interviews. In one camp are those who use an inclusive approach that treats most forms of group interviews as variants on focus groups. In another camp, however, are those who use an exclusive approach that treats focus groups as a narrower technique not to be confused with other types of group interviews. One version of the exclusive approach, which is particularly common in marketing research (Greenbaum 1988, 1993, McQuarrie 1996), is a statement that focus groups must meet some specified set of criteria, typically that they consist of structured discussions among 6 to 10 homogeneous strangers in a formal setting. The problem with this approach is that it fails to demonstrate any advantages of either limiting the definition of focus groups to studies that meet these criteria or excluding group interviews that deviate from them.

In contrast to such unthinking reliance on an exclusive definition of focus groups, Frey & Fontana (1991) have created a typology that locates focus groups as one among several categories of group interviews. The typology includes some that the present definition already distinguishes from focus groups (nominal and Delphi groups and observations of naturally occurring groups), and some (brainstorming groups and field interviews in naturally occurring settings) that the current definition would treat as variations on focus groups. (See Khan & Manderson 1992 for a similar but more anthropologically based typology). One way to assess the usefulness of a typology such as Frey & Fontana's is to ask if it can determine whether a particular group interview is or is not a focus group. According to the dimensions that define their typology, group interviews are something other than focus groups if they: (i) are conducted in informal settings; (ii) use nondirective interviewing; or (iii) use unstructured question formats. Yet applied demographers such as Knodel (1987, 1995) have held focus group interviews throughout the world and have concluded that they can be adapted to a wide variety of settings and culture practices. Similarly, social science texts on focus groups (Krueger 1993, Morgan 1988, Stewart & Shamdasani 1990) describe ways to conduct focus groups with more or less directive interviewing styles and more or less structured question formats, depending on the purposes of the particular project. It would thus, in actual practice, be quite difficult to apply Frey & Fontana's typology to determine whether any given group interview was or was not a focus group.

In the long run, the question of whether sociologists should use a more inclusive or exclusive definition of focus groups will depend on which approach maximizes both the effective application of available techniques and the innovative development of new techniques. For the present, this remains an

open question. Consequently, this chapter follows an inclusive approach that treats focus groups as a set of central tendencies, with many useful variations that can be matched to a variety of research purposes.

CURRENT USES FOR FOCUS GROUPS

This review necessarily concentrates on the uses of focus groups by sociologists. Still, it should be obvious that focus groups, like other qualitative methods, are used across a wide variety of different fields. Other disciplines in which focus groups are relatively widespread include communication studies (Albrecht et al 1993, Staley 1990), education (Brotherson & Goldstein 1992, Flores & Alonzo 1995, Lederman 1990), political science (Delli Carpini & Williams 1994, Kullberg 1994), and public health (Basch 1987). Outside of academia, focus groups are well known to be popular in marketing (Goldman & McDonald 1987, Greenbaum 1993), where they have been used for everything from breakfast cereals (Templeton 1987) to political candidates (Diamond & Bates 1992). This acceptance in applied marketing has not, however, carried over to the academic field of marketing (McQuarrie 1990), although there does seem to be a trend toward more methodological research in this field (McDonald 1993, Nelson & Frontczak 1988).

Given the breadth of possible applications of focus groups and group interviews, it is hardly surprising that they have found uses in many of the specialty areas that interest sociologists, including: aging (Knodel 1995, Duncan & Morgan 1994), criminology (Sasson, 1995), medical sociology (Morgan & Spanish 1985, McKinlay 1993), political sociology (Gamson 1992), social movements (Cable 1992), and the sociology of work (Bobo et al 1995). In addition, many applications of focus groups do not fit within the neat, traditional boundaries of sociology's subdisciplines. For example, Shively's (1992) study of how American Indians and Anglos responded to cowboy movies used focus groups within a cultural studies framework; Jarrett's (1993, 1994) work on low-income, African American women combined elements of family sociology, inequality, and race and ethnicity; and Pinderhughes' (1993) investigation of racially motivated violence mixed elements of urban sociology, criminology, and race relations.

Despite this wide-ranging interest in focus groups, they have found more currency within several specific areas of sociological interest. In particular, marketing's legacy of using focus groups to hear from consumers has carried over into their use in the development and evaluation of programs ranging from substance abuse (Lengua et al 1992) to curricular reform (Hendershott & Wright 1993). Program development efforts use focus groups to learn more about the potential targets of these programs in order to reach them more effectively.

This use often occurs under the explicit rubric of “social marketing,” which applies tools such as focus groups to socially valued goals, as in Bryant’s (1990) program to encourage breast feeding among low-income women. On the program evaluation side, focus groups have become an important tool in qualitative evaluation research, including not only post-program evaluation, but also needs assessment and strategic planning (Krueger 1994).

Two specific research areas where the applied use of focus groups has had a major and continuing link to sociology are family planning and HIV/AIDS. The application of focus groups to research on fertility first emerged in the early 1980s (e.g. Folch-Lyon et al 1981). These studies typically sought a better understanding of knowledge, attitudes, and practices with regard to contraception in the Third World; in particular, advocates of a social marketing approach to contraceptives (Schearer 1981) argued that focus groups could supplement the kind of attitudinal data that surveys produced. Since that time, focus groups have been an important source of data on fertility and family planning preferences around the world, as in the work of Ward et al (1991) in Guatemala, Honduras, and Zaire, or Knodel et al (1987) in Thailand. This established application in the study of sexual behavior also led to the use of focus groups in research on the spread of HIV, both in the Third World (Irwin et al 1991) and the West (Kline et al 1992, Pollak et al 1990).

An important theme that reappears in many of these uses of focus groups is their ability to “give a voice” to marginalized groups. For example, in early HIV/AIDS research (Joseph et al 1984), epidemiologists used focus groups to gain a better understanding of at-risk groups with whom they had little prior experience, such as gay and bisexual men. Focus groups have thus been used in many applied settings where there is a difference in perspective between the researchers and those with whom they need to work. Others have argued, however, that the value of focus groups goes well beyond listening to others, since they can serve as either a basis for empowering “clients” (Magill 1993, Race et al 1994) or as a tool in action and participatory research (Hugentobler et al 1992, Padilla 1993). Similarly, feminist researchers have noted the appeal of focus groups because they allow participants to exercise a fair degree of control over their own interactions (Nichols-Casebolt & Spakes 1995, Montell 1995).

USES IN COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS

As noted at the outset of this review, a content analysis of *Sociological Abstracts* revealed that a majority of the published research articles using focus groups combined them with other methods. Further examination of the specific combinations of focus groups with other methods showed that the most frequent pairings were with either in-depth, individual interviews or surveys.

Between these two, the use of focus groups with individual interviews is the more straightforward, since both are qualitative techniques. (This does not, however, imply that the two methods are interchangeable; the following section contains a comparison of individual and group interviews.) Investigators' reasons for combining individual and group interviews typically point to the greater depth of the former and the greater breadth of the latter (Crabtree et al 1993). For example, individual interview studies have used follow-up group interviews to check the conclusions from their analyses and to expand the study populations included in the research (Irwin 1970). This strategy has the advantage of getting reactions from a relatively wide range of participants in a relatively short time. In a complementary fashion, focus group studies have used follow-up interviews with individual participants to explore specific opinions and experiences in more depth, as well as to produce narratives that address the continuity of personal experiences over time (Duncan & Morgan 1994). This strategy has the advantage of first identifying a range of experiences and perspectives, and then drawing from that pool to add more depth where needed. Thus, depending on the varied needs that a qualitative study has for breadth and depth, there is little difficulty in combining individual and group interviews.

While studies that bring together focus groups and surveys are one of the leading ways of combining qualitative and quantitative methods, such designs also raise a complex set of issues, since the two methods produce such different kinds of data. Morgan (1993c) presented a conceptual framework to clarify these issues by distinguishing four ways of combining qualitative and quantitative methods in general and focus groups and surveys in particular. The four ways of combining the methods are based on which method received the primary attention and whether the secondary method served as a preliminary or follow-up study.

Thus, the first combination contains studies in which surveys are the primary method and focus groups serve in a preliminary capacity. Survey researchers typically use this design to develop the content of their questionnaires. Because surveys are inherently limited by the questions they ask, it is increasingly common to use focus groups to provide data on how the respondents themselves talk about the topics of the survey. Although this practice has long been common in marketing research, systematic publications in this area did not appear until social scientists renewed their interest in focus groups (Fuller et al 1993, O'Brien 1993, Zeller 1993b). Still, this is an area that is just beginning to receive attention, and many issues are only now arising, such as the need to find other means of pursuing focus group insights that are not amenable to survey research (Laurie 1992, Laurie & Sullivan 1991). At present, this is easily the

most common reason for combining focus groups and surveys.

In the second combination, focus groups are the primary method while surveys provide preliminary inputs that guide their application. Studies following this research design typically use the broad but “thin” data from surveys to assist in selecting samples for focus groups or topics for detailed analysis. With regard to sampling, Morgan & Zhao (1993) and O’Connor et al (1992) both used surveys of medical records to divide a larger population into different “segments” that they then compared using separate sets of focus groups. With regard to analysis, Morgan (1994) and Shively (1992) both illustrated the use of findings from a brief preliminary survey with focus group participants to guide the more detailed interpretive analysis of the data from the group discussions. Compared to the first combination, studies that use surveys as a secondary method to assist focus group research are relatively rare.

The third combination once again uses surveys as the primary method, but the focus groups now act as a follow-up that assists in interpreting the survey results. One increasingly common use for qualitative follow-up methods, including focus groups, is to recontact survey respondents for illustrative material that can be quoted in conjunction with quantitative findings. More interesting from a methodological perspective are efforts to clarify poorly understood results, such as Knodel’s (1987) and Wolff et al’s (1993) efforts to account for fertility rates and education levels in Thailand, Morgan’s (1989) investigations of the ineffectiveness of social support among recent widows, and Harari & Beaty’s (1990) deeper probing of surface similarities in the survey responses of black workers and white managers in South Africa under apartheid. Among the four combinations, these designs are the second most frequent, but they have yet to receive any systematic methodological attention.

The final combination of surveys and focus groups uses focus groups as the primary method and surveys as a source of follow-up data. One such application would examine the prevalence of issues or themes from the focus groups. For example, Nichols-Casebolt & Spakes (1995:53) followed up their focus groups by locating secondary data from surveys that showed policy makers “the scope of the problems associated with the issues identified by the participants.” Another possibility would be to survey a large number of sites to determine where the results from a more limited focus group study might be most immediately transferable. But studies that employ designs from this fourth combination are easily the rarest of this set. One likely reason that those who conduct focus group studies seldom do smaller follow-up surveys is their desire to avoid any implication that quantitative data are necessary to “verify” the results of the qualitative research. In other words, the issues that accompany combining methods from different “paradigms” (Lincoln & Guba 1985) involve not just technical

considerations, but epistemological and political issues as well (Bryman 1988). Still, the current popularity of work from the first combination, where focus groups aid in developing surveys, demonstrates the potential value of combining focus groups with quantitative methods. It thus seems likely that research using various combinations with surveys will continue to be not only one of the major uses of focus groups but also one of the most practical ways of bringing together qualitative and quantitative methods.

HOW FOCUS GROUPS COMPARE TO OTHER SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS

Despite the increasingly widespread use of focus groups as a method within sociology and the other social sciences, virtually all this work has occurred in the past ten years. This “newcomer” status has encouraged comparisons between focus groups and the various traditional methods in each of these areas, but researchers have offered two very different reasons for comparing methods. One reason for comparing focus groups to more familiar methods has been to determine whether the two methods produce equivalent data. According to this view, focus groups are most useful when they reproduce the results of the standard methods in a particular field. A different reason for comparing focus groups to existing methods has been to locate the unique contributions that each can make to a field of studies. According to this view, focus groups are most useful when they produce new results that would not be possible with the standard methods in a particular field. There is an obvious paradox here, as focus groups cannot produce results that are simultaneously the same as and different from results of familiar techniques. Unfortunately, the failure to recognize these divergent goals has limited the cumulative knowledge from studies that compare focus groups to other methods. Nonetheless, these comparisons are useful for summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups.

COMPARISONS TO SURVEYS

In one of the earliest reports of a major social science application of focus groups, Folch-Lyon et al (1981) also included a detailed comparison to a survey on the same topic. This study investigated attitudes toward contraception in Mexico using two independent research teams. One team conducted 44 focus groups with some 300 participants, while the other did household surveys with over 2000 respondents. Overall, the authors had little difficulty in matching the investigation of their substantive topics across the two methods; their results showed an overwhelming convergence. As Stycos (1981) pointed out,

however, most of Folch-Lyon et al's judgments about the convergence between the two methods were based on subjective assessments of the correspondence of the findings; fortunately, more recent efforts have used more systematic comparisons.

Ward et al (1991) compared survey and focus group results from three studies on family planning in Guatemala, Honduras, and Zaire. For each of their three studies, they matched topic areas where methods contained similar questions, and they judged results from the two methods to be similar when "they would lead to the same conclusions" (p. 272). Based on explicit comparisons across a total of 60 variables, they found that the results from the two methods were: (i) highly similar for 30% of the variables; (ii) similar, but focus groups provided more information for 42% of the variables; (iii) similar, but surveys provided more information for 17% ; and (iv) dissimilar for 12% of the variables. The biggest difference found between the methods was the ability of the focus groups to produce more in-depth information on the topic at hand.

In another systematic comparison of survey and focus group results, Saint-Germain et al (1993) reported on two studies of the barriers to breast cancer screening services for older Hispanic women in the southwestern United States. To assess the comparability of the results, the authors rank-ordered a list of barriers according to how often survey respondents had experienced each, and then they compared this to a rank-order of how often each barrier was mentioned in the focus groups. Saint-Germain et al's conclusions (1993:363) matched those of Ward et al: "The findings of the focus group interviews, in most cases, confirmed the findings of the previous population surveys. In many cases, the focus group interviews went beyond the information obtained in the survey, amplifying our understanding of the various facets of barriers to breast cancer screening and specifying more exactly how some of the barriers work in practice."

Although each of these studies emphasized the convergence of the results from focus groups and surveys, a consistent set of differences did occur in all three studies. First, the survey interview setting limited what respondents said about sensitive topics, in comparison to what they revealed in focus groups. Second, the differences in response options meant that surveys were better able to elicit yes/no answers about specific behaviors and experiences, even though the forced-choice format of the survey items limited what respondents could say on general attitude areas, in comparison to the more open-ended discussions in the focus groups. Finally, Ward et al explicitly noted that all of these comparisons used only the variables that occurred in both studies, thus downplaying the fact that the surveys typically covered many more topics than did the focus groups. There was thus a key tradeoff between the depth that

focus groups provided and the breadth that surveys offered.

COMPARISONS TO INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Fern's (1982) work on the relative productivity of individual interviews and focus groups was one of the very few methodological studies that involved a head-to-head comparison between the two methods. Using an "idea generation" task, Fern compared focus groups to an equivalent number of aggregated responses from individual interviews (i.e. "nominal groups"). He determined that each focus group participant produced only 60% to 70% as many ideas as they would have in an individual interview; he also had raters judge the quality of ideas from the two methods, and again an advantage appeared for individual interviews. These results clearly argue against the notion that focus groups have a "synergy" that makes them more productive than an equivalent number of individual interviews. Instead, the real issue may well be the relative efficiency of the two methods for any given project. For example, Fern's results suggest that two eight-person focus groups would produce as many ideas as 10 individual interviews. As Crabtree et al (1993) have pointed out, however, a number of logistical factors, such as location of the interviews, the mobility of the participants, the flexibility of their schedules, would determine which study would actually be easier to accomplish.

The major issue in studies of individual and group interviews has not, however, been the number of ideas they generate, but the comparability of the results they produce. Wight (1994) reported one of the rare studies on this issue. The study involved both group and individual interviews with the same adolescent males concerning their sexual experiences, and systematic variation in which of the two types of interviews was done first. Wight concluded that the greatest number of discrepancies occurred between reports of boys who participated in individual interviews first and then in focus groups, while boys who started in group interviews gave similar accounts in subsequent individual interviews. Kitzinger (1994a,b) reported that the conclusions about the results from her study on HIV issues validated those of Wight's, although she also found that the difference between individual and group interviews was limited to heterosexual males. Kitzinger thus argued against a generalized effect of groups on conformity, and she called for more attention to how such processes are affected by the group's composition, the topic, the relationship of the interviewer to the group, and the general context of the interview.

Kitzinger (1994b:173) also reached the more general conclusion that, "Differences between interview and group data cannot be classified in terms of validity versus invalidity or honesty versus dishonesty. . . .The group data documenting macho or sexual harassing behaviour is no more 'invalid' than that showing the

research participants' relatively acceptable behaviour in interview settings." It thus seems a safe conclusion that, if one searches, one is bound to find differences in how some interviewees talk about some topics in individual versus group interviews. For those cases where we are interested only in a specific social context, this interest will determine which form of data is more valid. In general, however, the existence of differences between what is said in individual and group interviews is as much a statement about our culture as our methods, and this is clearly a research topic of interest in its own right.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF FOCUS GROUPS

One benefit of comparing focus groups to other methods is a more sophisticated understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups. For example, rather than just listing exploratory research as a strength of focus groups, it is now necessary to note that individual, nominal interviews can be a more effective technique for idea generation (Fern 1982) and that surveys can be more effective for determining the prevalence of any given attitude or experience (Ward et al 1992). Comparisons to other methods have thus led to the conclusion that the real strength of focus groups is not simply in exploring what people have to say, but in providing insights into the sources of complex behaviors and motivations (Morgan & Krueger 1993).

Morgan & Krueger also argued that the advantages of focus groups for investigating complex behaviors and motivations were a direct outcome of the interaction in focus groups, what has been termed "the group effect" (Carey 1994, Carey & Smith 1994). An emphasis on the specific kinds of interactions that occur in focus groups is also an improvement over vague assertions that "synergy" is one of their strengths. What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other. As Morgan & Krueger (1993) have also emphasized, such interaction offers valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among the participants. This ability to observe the extent and nature of interviewees' agreement and disagreement is a unique strength of focus groups. A further strength comes from the researcher's ability to ask the participants themselves for comparisons among their experiences and views, rather than aggregating individual data in order to speculate about whether or why the interviewees differ.

The weaknesses of focus groups, like their strengths, are linked to the process of producing focused interactions, raising issues about both the role of the moderator in generating the data and the impact of the group itself on the data. With regard to the role of the moderator, Agar & MacDonald (1995) used discourse analysis to compare the conversations between interviewers and

interviewees in a single focus group and a set of individual interviews. They concluded that the dynamics of the individual interviews put more burden on the informants to explain themselves to the interviewer, while the moderator's efforts to guide the group discussion had the ironic consequence of disrupting the interaction that was the point of the group. Saferstein (1995) also used discourse analysis to make a similar point about moderator control in a comparison of focus groups and naturally occurring talk at a job site. In particular, he noted that it is the moderator, rather than the ongoing work of the group, that determines the agenda and form of the discussion. Both of these articles directly questioned the assertion that focus groups mimic a conversation among the participants, and each independently suggested that a meeting would be a better analogy, due to the control exercised by the moderator.

Although the issues that Agar & MacDonald (1995) and Saferstein (1995) raised are of most concern with more directive styles of moderating, there is no denying that the behavior of the moderator has consequences for the nature of the group interviews. But the issue of interviewer effects is hardly limited to focus groups, as is shown in work from both survey research (Fowler & Mangione 1990) and individual interviewing (Mischler 1986). All of these issues point to the importance of understanding the range of variation that is possible across different styles of moderating, a range discussed in the following section.

In terms of weaknesses that are due to the impact of the group on the discussion itself, Sussman et al (1991) used a design from small group research and administered questionnaires before and after focus groups to find out if the discussions changed the participants' attitudes. They found the predicted "polarization" effect—attitudes became more extreme after the group discussion. The magnitude of this effect was small, however, as it accounted for only 4% of the variance in attitude change; this may be significant in an analysis of variance, but it is not likely to skew the results of most focus group research. Nonetheless, the point is well taken that we know little about how group members affect each other, and research designs from the social psychological study of small groups can offer useful tools for investigating this issue.

A final weakness due to the impact of the group on its participants concerns the range of topics that can be researched effectively in groups. Because group interaction requires mutual self-disclosure, it is undeniable that some topics will be unacceptable for discussion among some categories of research participants. At present, however, assertions about this weakness of focus groups are based more on intuition than data, since there are no empirical investigations of the range of topics or participants that either can or cannot be studied with group interviews. In particular, claims that focus groups are inappropriate for

“sensitive topics” seem to ignore the widespread use of group interviewing to study sexual behavior in all forms. Further, the growing use of focus groups with cultural minorities and marginalized groups suggests that experience is the best predictor of where focus groups will and will not work. Fortunately, several of the researchers who have worked with sensitive topics and minority groups have written about their use of focus groups in these settings (Jarrett 1993, 1994, Hoppe et al 1995, Hughes & DuMont 1993, Kitzinger 1994a,b, Zeller 1993a), and only time will tell how widely these techniques apply to other topics and populations.

RESEARCH DESIGNS FOR SOCIOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS OF FOCUS GROUPS

As the previous sections demonstrate, sociologists and other social scientists have used focus groups in many ways for many purposes. Yet, if there are many ways of doing focus groups, then how does a practicing researcher make choices between doing focus groups one way versus another? And how does an outside reviewer determine whether a focus group project was done in a proper and effective fashion? The emerging consensus is that these issues can be resolved through an emphasis on research design in focus groups.

An emphasis on research design has advantages both for the field of focus groups as a whole and for individual investigators. For the field of focus groups, Morgan (1992a) has argued that an emphasis on research design would generate explicit principles that would replace the “rules of thumb” that have guided past practice. Thus, rather than simply asserting that focus groups should consist of structured discussions among 6 to 10 homogeneous strangers in a formal setting, an emphasis on research design would systematically investigate the implications of conducting more structured versus less structured discussions, of using smaller versus larger groups, etc. For the individual investigator, such research design principles would provide a means for linking the purposes of the research and the specific procedures that best achieve these purposes. For example, in his research on the political consciousness of ordinary citizens, Gamson (1992) first noted that his procedures departed from the prevailing rules of thumb when he used loosely moderated groups of four to six familiar acquaintances who met at one of the participants’ homes; he then justified each of these design decisions by stating why it would produce data better suited to his purposes.

In considering the set of issues involved in designing focus group research, it is useful to distinguish between decisions that apply to the research project as a whole (i.e. project-level design issues), and those that apply to the conduct

of a particular group (i.e. group-level design issues). While decisions at the project level specify the kinds of data that the focus groups should produce, group-level design decisions largely determine how to conduct the groups in order to produce such data. In particular, many of the group-level decisions are related to issues of group dynamics that help to ensure a productive discussion.

PROJECT-LEVEL DESIGN ISSUES

Standardization

As a project-level design issue, standardization addresses the extent to which the identical questions and procedures are used in every group. At one extreme would be an emphasis on “emergence” that lets the questions and procedures shift from group to group in order to take advantage of what has been learned in previous groups. At the other extreme, a project could begin by determining a fixed set of questions and procedures that would apply throughout. Of course, standardization is actually a matter of degree, and even standardized designs allow minor variations that accommodate the unique aspects of each group, in order to avoid what Merton et al (1990) called the fallacy of adhering to fixed questions.

Although nothing like a census of focus group designs among sociologists exists, it is quite clear that the majority of these research projects have used a fixed research design that relied on a consistent set of predetermined questions and procedures. This tendency toward standardized research designs has not gone unexamined. Orosz (1994) has argued that this aspect of focus groups is inconsistent with many of the key tenets of qualitative research, while Brotherson & Goldstein (1992) made the case for pursuing standardization within an emergent research design. According to the present argument for making decisions according to research design principles, whether to standardize the questions and procedures in a focus group project should not be based on past tradition, within either the more standardized practices of focus group researchers or the less standardized approach favored by practitioners of other qualitative methods. Instead, it should be based on a conscious assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization with regard to the goals of a particular project.

The great advantage of standardization, and its most common justification, is the high level of comparability that it produces across groups. This comparability is particularly valuable when the goal of the research is to compare the responses of different categories of participants (see the discussion of segmentation in the next section). As Knodel (1993) pointed out, standardization has the particular advantage of facilitating the analysis of focus groups by allowing

for direct comparisons of the discussions from group to group. The obvious disadvantage of standardization is that one must live with whatever questions and procedures were chosen prior to entering the field, which would be inimical to many truly exploratory applications of focus groups.

Morgan (1993c) has described two types of designs that combine the advantages of more standardized and more emergent designs (see Morgan 1992b for a partial application of these procedures). The first such design breaks the project into phases that move from less standardized to more standardized groups. This has the advantage of allowing the early groups in the project to take a more exploratory approach, which then serves as the basis for developing a later set of standardized questions and procedures grounded in the data themselves. The second compromise design organizes the questions in each group according to a “funnel” pattern that begins with a fixed set of core questions and then proceeds to a variable set of specific issues. This has the advantage of maintaining comparability across groups for the first part of each discussion but allowing the later section of each group to vary according to the emergent needs of the research.

Sampling

Focus group research reveals its historical association with marketing research by using the term “segmentation” to capture sampling strategies that consciously vary the composition of groups. This use of segmentation to create groups that consist of particular categories of participants is a longstanding practice, as illustrated by Folch-Lyon et al’s (1981) study on family planning, where they composed groups that were as homogeneous as possible by sex, age, marital status, contraceptive use, socioeconomic status, and geographical location. The most obvious kinds of segmentation capture something about the research topic itself. For example, if gender differences were of interest, then one might conduct separate groups of men and women, or an evaluation study might segment the groups into more frequent and less frequent users of the program in question.

Segmentation offers two basic advantages. First, it builds a comparative dimension into the entire research project, including the data analysis. For example, Folch-Lyon et al (1981) analyzed their data according to the categories described above and found the most wide-ranging differences between groups of men and women, with some additional differences between groups in rural and urban areas. Second, segmentation facilitates discussions by making the participants more similar to each other. For example, even if the behavior of men and women does not differ greatly on a given topic, discussion still may flow more smoothly in groups that are homogeneous rather than mixed with regard to sex. The same logic applies to dividing groups according to the age,

race, or social class of the participants, although the value of segmenting to facilitate a free-flowing discussion obviously depends on the research topic.

The obvious disadvantage of segmentation is that it can greatly multiply the number of groups. As Knodel (1993) pointed out, it is seldom wise to run just one group per segment, since what one learns about that segment is confounded with the group dynamics of that unique set of participants. As Knodel also noted, however, using multiple segmentation criteria can produce acceptable designs that have only one group “per cell” in the overall design, as long as there are multiple groups in each separate segment (e.g. there may be several groups of women, several rural groups, and several groups of older participants, but only one group of older, rural women). Even so, using multiple segmentation criteria can easily lead to projects that involve large numbers of focus groups, like the 44 groups conducted by Folch-Lyon et al (1981).

Number of Groups

The most common rule of thumb is that most projects consist of four to six focus groups. The typical justification for this range is that the data become “saturated” and little new information emerges after the first few groups, so moderators can predict what participants will say even before they say it (Zeller 1993b). Morgan (1992a) has suggested that diversity in either the participants or the range of topics to be covered will increase the number of groups necessary to achieve saturation. For example, Kitzinger wished to hear about views on AIDS from a wide range of different populations and thus conducted 52 groups, while Gamson (1992) wanted each of his groups to give their opinions on four different political issues and thus conducted 37 groups in order to produce enough discussion on each topic.

As the previous section noted, using multiple segments will increase the number of groups needed, which is a special case of diversity in the study population. Projects that use a lower level of standardization will also typically need more groups, since this produces more variation in the topics that are raised group to group. The connection between the number of groups and issues of standardization and segmentation raises the question of how different aspects of research design for focus groups intersect—a topic addressed at the end of this section.

GROUP-LEVEL DESIGN ISSUES

Level of Moderator Involvement

The presence of a moderator is one of the most striking features of focus groups. Groups in which the moderator exercises a higher degree of control are termed “more structured,” and Morgan (1992a) has called attention to two senses in

which a group can be more structured. First, it can be more structured with regard to asking questions, so that the moderator controls what topics are discussed (e.g. directing attention away from what are deemed less important issues). Second, it can be more structured with regard to managing group dynamics, so that the moderator controls the way that the participants interact (e.g. trying to get everyone to participate equally in the discussion). Both of these aspects of moderator involvement can be elements of the research design.

With regard to the moderator's involvement in asking questions, a less structured discussion means that the group can pursue its own interests, while a more structured approach means that the moderator imposes the researcher's interests, as embodied in the questions that guide the discussion. A key factor that makes groups more or less structured is simply the number of questions. Thus, if the average focus group lasts 90 minutes, and the moderator has the responsibility for covering a great many questions during that time, then the moderator will be heavily involved in controlling the group's discussion. Unfortunately, there is currently little consensus about what constitutes a more structured or less structured approach to questioning. For example, Lederman (1990:123) characterized a guide that contained five broad questions as "quite structured," while Byers & Wilcox (1991:65) termed a guide with 17 specific questions "relatively unstructured."

One possible cause for this confusion is the failure to distinguish between structure that controls questioning and structure that controls group dynamics. In managing group dynamics, a less structured approach allows participants to talk as much or as little as they please, while a more structured approach means that the moderator will encourage those who might otherwise say little and limit those who might otherwise dominate the discussion. Although most marketing approaches to focus groups (e.g. Greenbaum 1993) have typically advocated a more structured control of group dynamics, many social science approaches have explicitly favored a less directive style of interviewing (e.g. Krueger 1994, Merton et al 1990). Morgan's (1988) instructions for how to conduct "self-managed" groups, in which the moderator does not even sit at the same table as the participants, probably represent the extreme in social science advocacy of less structured approaches to group dynamics.

In general, marketing researchers, more than social science researchers, prefer research designs with high levels of moderator involvement that impose more structure with regard to both asking questions and managing group dynamics. Morgan (1988) has suggested that this reflects a difference between the marketing goal of answering questions from an audience of paying customers and the social science goal of generating new knowledge for an audience of peer reviewers. To the extent that this broad generalization does hold, it is a

nice illustration of the general principle that research designs should follow from research goals. This conclusion—that approaches to moderating should be linked to research goals—is strongly supported by one of the few instances of systematic research that evaluates differences in moderator style (McDonald 1993). Further, it implies that arguments about whether moderators should use a more or less structured approach are meaningless unless one specifies the goals of the research.

Group Size

The number of participants who are invited to a focus group is one element of the research design that is clearly under the researcher's control. Morgan (1992a) reviewed the bases for determining group size, concluding that smaller groups were more appropriate with emotionally charged topics that generated high levels of participant involvement, while larger groups worked better with more neutral topics that generated lower levels of involvement. On the one hand, a smaller group gives each participant more time to discuss her or his views and experiences on topics in which they all are highly involved. On the other hand, a larger group contains a wider range of potential responses on topics where each participant has a low level of involvement. In addition, small groups make it easier for moderators to manage the active discussions that often accompany high levels of involvement and emotional topics, whereas large groups are easier to manage when each participant has a lower level of involvement in the topic.

This last point once again raises an issue that involves the intersection of two different design principles: group size and moderator involvement. Although it is generally the case that design dimensions cannot be considered in isolation from each other, current knowledge about how design issues impinge on each other is limited to a few obvious considerations. In addition to the linkage between group size and moderator involvement, earlier portions of this section noted connections between standardization and sample segmentation, and between the number of groups and both standardization and segmentation. There is thus an increasing but still limited stock of knowledge about how design issues go together. This limitation is understandable, given that most of the explicit investigations of research design in focus groups have come from social scientists and consequently reflect only a decade or so of activity.

DATA QUALITY CONCERNS

The basic goal in specifying research designs for focus groups is to ensure that the research procedures deliver the desired data. Despite the best research

designs, however, things can still go wrong due to poor planning or the inappropriate implementation of otherwise optimal designs. Krueger (1993) and Morgan (1995) have both noted that data quality depends on a number of factors, including whether the researcher locates enough participants, selects appropriate samples, chooses relevant questions, has a qualified moderator(s), and uses an effective analysis strategy.

Standards for reporting on research procedures are one practical step to improve the quality of focus group research. At present, the reporting of focus group procedures is a haphazard affair at best. Based on the studies reviewed for this chapter, the following is one effort to develop such standards. First, to learn the overarching context for the research, readers should know whether a standardized set of questions and procedures applied throughout the project. Then, most basically, readers should know the number of groups conducted and the size range of these groups. There should also be information on the group composition, including relevant background data on the participants. In particular, when groups are divided into different sample segments, there should be information on the basis for this sampling strategy and the number of groups per segment. Regardless of whether the study used segmentation, it is important to report the sources for locating participants and other information about recruitment procedures. In terms of the interview itself, thorough summaries of the question content are needed; surprisingly, many current publications say very little about the questions that were asked. Similarly, most current reports say little about moderating, and useful information would include concrete descriptions of the degree of structure that the moderator(s) imposed, how many moderators were used, and what their training and qualifications were. Finally, ethical issues need to be discussed, and, although the field as a whole has been slow to address ethical concerns in focus group research, there now is at least one discussion of this topic (Smith 1995).

This kind of information would aid not only reviewers in judging the quality of the research design and procedures but also other researchers in adapting these practices into future work. For both of these purposes, it would be highly desirable for research reports to go beyond merely presenting factual information to including justifications for the more crucial design decisions. This process of making public the basis for our decisions about why to do focus groups one way and not another is a vital step in the growth of our field.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

The steady increase in the use of focus groups over the past decade clearly demonstrates that sociologists and other social scientists have found them to be a useful and practical method for gathering qualitative data. The leading role that

sociologists have played in this field has been most evident in methodological research on focus groups, which has given sociologists a major influence on both their current uses and future directions. In terms of future directions, a group of social science researchers participated in focus groups, funded in part by the American Sociological Association, that led to a statement on "Future Directions for Focus Groups" (Morgan 1993b). Not surprisingly, several of the specific topics considered there have been echoed here, such as the need to set standards for focus groups and the need to further define the strengths and weaknesses of the method.

The major theme raised in the focus group discussions on future direction was the need to do more research on focus groups as a method, and several of the studies reviewed here provide concrete examples of how to accomplish this. For example, both Agar & MacDonald (1995) and Saferstein (1995) demonstrate the value of discourse analysis for investigating interactions between moderators and participants. Sociologists who have experimented with discourse analysis (e.g. Gamson 1992) have concluded that the time and expense spent in producing such data have little value for substantive analyses of what was said in groups. Yet, methodological analyses of how things are said in focus groups may well be a more profitable use of these tools. Another potentially useful technique from another field is Sussman et al's (1991) application of procedures from small group research. As Morgan & Krueger (1993) note, however, it is important not to confuse the standard decision-making paradigm in small groups research with the data gathering goals of focus groups. One particularly promising aspect of the Sussman et al procedures is the post-group questionnaire, and other focus group researchers (Pies 1993, Swenson et al 1992) have used this technique to investigate not only the impact that the discussion had on the participants, but also their feelings about the discussion, including the extent to which they were able to share their true opinions on the topics they discussed. One final promising technique for methodological research on focus groups is McDonald's (1993) use of an archive of focus group transcripts to investigate how differences in project goals were linked to differences in moderator style. Unfortunately, qualitative researchers have been slower in archiving their work than their quantitative counterparts; still, the opportunity to compare the qualitative procedures of multiple investigators across multiple topics would be an exciting opportunity that should not be limited to focus groups.

Data analysis is another topic for future work on focus groups. To date, most discussions of how to analyze focus groups have occurred within broader discussions of the method (e.g. Knodel 1993), and only one article is specifically dedicated to analysis of issues (Bertrand et al 1992). Although it is true that many of the analytic issues in focus groups are the same as in other qualitative

methods, it is also true that focus groups raise some unique issues, such as the ongoing debate about the circumstances under which the unit of analysis should be the groups, the participants, or the participants' utterances (Carey & Smith 1994, Gamson 1992, Morgan 1995). In addition, focus groups offer some special opportunities for the application of computer technologies in the analysis of qualitative data (Javidi et al 1991).

Beyond such strictly methodological concerns, there are also promising new uses for focus groups. The most notable of these involves researchers who are more actively engaged with the participants and their concerns. In an earlier section, this was summarized as an increasing interest in focus groups among those who pursue goals such as empowerment or approaches such as action and participatory research. Underlying many of these efforts is a desire to break down the division between using groups as a means for gathering data and as a means for educating, mobilizing, or intervening with participants. This matches a widespread concern in the social sciences about the artificiality of the division between researchers and those who are researched. This issue is especially relevant for focus groups, since they have been widely touted (e.g. Morgan & Krueger 1993) as a means for helping to bridge the gap between those in authority and the people they control.

One question about focus groups that has remained unasked, however, is why they have reemerged with such popularity at this particular time. One segment of our future work on focus groups should thus go beyond practical concerns with the method itself to ask about their place within the history of sociology—especially since this is the discipline that is self-consciously charged with the study of humans in groups. Part of the present popularity of focus groups may indeed be due to their unique advantages for addressing such contemporary issues as empowerment and diversity. Whether this is true or not, it is clear that focus groups are both being shaped by the directions that our discipline is taking and playing a role in shaping those directions.

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