A Handbook for Social Science Field Research: Essays & Bibliographic Sources on Research Design and Methods

Focus Groups: Focus Group Interviews

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Imagine eight 30-something single women sitting around a table over coffee discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the pill, the diaphragm, the condom, and other forms of contraception. A moderator facilitates their discussion, and a note taker and tape recorder capture their interaction for a researcher to review and analyze at a later date. This description is an example of a focus group interview.

The moderator could be the lead researcher on the project but often is not. The women could be acquaintances or intimates but are probably strangers who have something in common. A similar geographic or social space may facilitate their participation. They will agree and disagree, interrupting one another from time to time. Some will talk more than others. Some will talk about themselves. Others will talk about other people they know. The discussion heads in unanticipated directions on several occasions.

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Focus groups, or small group interviews characterized by group interactions, have a long history in the social sciences (Bogardus 1926; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall 1990; Morgan 1997). They are also common in health education research (Kitzinger 1994). In applied settings, they are widely used in market research (Manoff 1985).

Researchers have debated and rarely agreed on the advantages and disadvantages of focus group discussions. As a method, focus groups occupy an intermediate space that is not the usual terrain for either quantitative or qualitative researchers of the more purist ilk. Focus group interviews can share characteristics of survey research in that individuals are asked to participate in what is usually a structured interview on a predesignated topic, often with a moderator or researcher who "drops in" for the interview and then leaves with data to be analyzed back in the office. At the same

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time, focus group interviews can share characteristics of ethnographic research in that the emphasis is on open-ended questions that produce text-based data that need to be transcribed and analyzed with a qualitative tool kit. The individuals who participate are often strategically selected for attributes deemed relevant to the research question, and researchers may develop relationships with informants over time through repeated local interviews. Focus groups can differ along numerous axes, including formality, degree of structure, familiarity of participants with one another, and the involvement of lead researchers. Focus groups are sometimes used in combination with established quantitative methods and in survey research (Knodel 1997). Open-ended discussion on themes related to a planned survey can aid in the development of survey questions or help to refine an instrument before pretesting. Focus groups have also been used to assess construct validity or to aid in the interpretation of quantitative results (see, e.g., Entwisle et al. 1996; Knodel, Havanon, & Sittitrai 1990; Short et al. 2002). While a regression model might suggest an association between two variables, it does not explain why such an association exists. Focus groups designed to include individuals who might provide insight into a particular relationship can be used to develop interpretations for observed relationships.

Focus groups have also been used in combination with established qualitative methods. Focus group interviews on violence can yield different data from individual interviews on violence (Hollander 2004). Group interviews can be used to gain insight into normative understandings of issues. They can provide insight into the way individuals discuss (or do not discuss) selected topics. Body language, uncomfortable pauses, and patterns of eye contact, in addition to verbal cues, can indicate topics of greater or lesser comfort (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell 2000).

In research I conducted on family relationships in the context of high HIV/AIDS prevalence in southern Africa, I found that informal group **[p. 105 ↓]** interviews provided valuable insights beyond those generated by structured, in-depth interviews. The group discussions were especially useful for elaborating the normative prescriptions against HIV testing and condom use among couples in serious romantic and sexual relationships. Discussions in the group context focused more on what can and cannot be done in relationships today, while parallel discussions in individual interviews focused more on individual-level explanations for behavior. The group laughter at the idea of a couple seeking (free) HIV tests before initiating a sexual relationship, and the

conversations that ensued, yielded rich data about relationships in this context. As a result, the individual-level and group-level data complement one another in ways that enhance ongoing analyses.

Whether focus groups are appropriate as a stand-alone method of data collection is a subject of ongoing discussion. Michell (1999) argues against using them to the exclusion of other methods, citing the potential for the silencing of voices, especially when group members have ongoing social relations. Because of small-group dynamics, minority opinions can be silenced, or group members with less power may be less willing to present their views (Hollander 2004; Morgan 1997). For this reason, some researchers conduct individual interviews as well. Others recognize the influence of group context on product but do not pair focus groups with individual interviews; indeed, numerous researchers have published useful studies based solely or primarily on focus group data (e.g., Henderson et al. 2000; Krause et al. 2000; Peracca, Knodel, & Saengtienchai 1998), although sometimes the larger research projects from which their analyses were drawn included other forms of data.

Overall, I suggest that focus group techniques are most valuable when researchers (a) adopt this method when they seek data best provided by group interaction; (b) design and carry out the interviews so that they elicit the desired group interaction; and (c) analyze the data in a way that reflects the method by which they were collected. The key is to use focus groups deliberately to achieve a specific research goal. Because focus group interviews feature small group interaction, they are not a substitute for individual interviews.

Focus Group, Focused Group, and Group Interviews

What are the characteristics that make a group conversation on a research-relevant topic a focus group interview? Do focus group interviews require a particular interview technique? Can group discussions that occur in the field as part of a village ethnography be called focus group discussions? The **[p. 106 ↓]** semantic debate that

surrounds focus group interviews can be bewildering. At issue is the slippery meaning of the term "focus group interview" or "focus group discussion."

Morgan defines focus groups as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (1997, p. 6). This definition is inclusive of interviews with groups that gather naturally in a particular space, as long as the conversation of the group is organized around a research-relevant topic. Others prefer to reserve the term "focus group interview" for a more narrowly defined set of group interviews in which participants are invited because they meet a set of inclusion criteria.

The term "focus" (or "focused") refers to the fact that a moderator intervenes to shape the discussion using a researcher-determined strategy. Often, the discussion will be orchestrated around a topic or common experience, but it is possible to design a research strategy that elicits conversation within a strategically selected group on participant-initiated topics that emerge.

Part of the semantic confusion surrounding "focus group interviews" stems from the conflation of the term "focused interview" with "focus *group* interview." The former was described by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990) in *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures,* a book on research methods originally published in 1956. Paraphrasing the authors (1990, p. 3), the "focused interview" is a research method in which (a) interviewees experience a particular situation; (b) the particulars of the situation are analyzed by a social scientist, who generates hypotheses based on this analysis; (c) interview guides based on the hypotheses are developed; and (d) interviews are conducted that focus on the subjective experiences of the interviewees and ascertain their "definitions of the situation." Example situations include listening to a particular radio program or participating in a social situation such as a political rally. Significantly, the authors include a chapter on the "group interview," but most of the volume focuses on the research technique as it relates to individual interviews.

In the introduction to the second edition, Merton suggests that there is intellectual continuity between what he and colleagues called "focused interviews" and what others call "focus groups" (Merton et al. 1990, p. xxix). Indeed, parallels exist. My reading suggests the difference is emphasis. Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990) described

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a specific, four-part interview strategy that emphasizes the "focus" in an interview. They describe how to create and capitalize on focus, such as by providing a common stimulus and exploring a priori hypotheses, when interviewing individuals or groups. By contrast, more recent usage of the term "focus group" highlights the group aspect of the interview. Interview formats, including the degree of focus and structure, can vary considerably, but the group aspect is universal.

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One final term deserves introduction: "focus group discussion." Some researchers substitute "discussion" for "interview" to highlight the interaction among participants in focus group interviews. More recently, some researchers have used the term "peer group discussion" to refer to a specific type of focus group discussion that involves adolescents. With peer group discussions, familiarity among participants is acknowledged or encouraged. Peer group discussions can take place among school children who attend the same school and as a consequence have a relationship with one another before and after the interview, or they can be carried out by designing longitudinal focus groups that bring together the same children repeatedly (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999; Bohmer & Kirumira 2000; Harrison, Xaba, & Kunene 2001). The focus group definition used here, namely, a research technique that generates data based on group interaction, does not require that the topic of a focus group interview be predetermined by the researcher, though most often it will be. This definition also highlights the group aspect of the interview rather than the interview strategy.

Emphasizing the Group in Focus Group

Social science research, and sociological research in particular, is predicated on the assertion that groups or collectivities are more than simple sums of the individuals who comprise them (see, e.g., Wolff 1950 on Simmel). It follows that it would be a-sociological to use the group interview as a convenient way to interview many individuals at once.

How do focus group interviews and individual interviews differ? A key difference is the unit of analysis. With focus groups, the unit of analysis is the group, not the individual.

Participants respond directly to a moderator's questions and also to comments made by other members of the group. The discussion (and any individual response) is affected by the social contexts represented by the group. For example, adolescent boys discuss their attitudes toward girls differently in individual interviews than in focus group discussions with other adolescent boys. We might surmise that their responses would be even more different had they been expressed in groups that included adolescent girls. This issue is not unique to focus group interviews but is perhaps exaggerated by the group format. It is a feature that researchers might seek to use to strategic advantage. By contrast, in individual interviews, in which the individual is the unit of analysis, some researchers might attempt to minimize the effect of interaction, or "interviewer effects."

Good focus groups capitalize on process. They can be especially generative when group members interact to develop an explanation or accomplish **[p. 108 ↓]** a task. Participants ask questions of one another that differ from those of the researcher or moderator, and their responses to one another introduce alternate interpretations of the ongoing dialogue. The same individual might offer one view early in the interview and later revise it as others in the group react, comment, and express their own ideas.

There can be a discomfort with focus groups among those who take the epistemological position that positivistic research paradigms are the most legitimate research paradigms. Focus groups, arguably more than other interview techniques, require comfort with interactionist perspectives. Their very design is often built around variations in context. For example, a researcher interested in the organization of child care might interview young parents. However, recognizing the importance of context to the discussion, the researcher might design focus groups that include three sets of interviews: one set with mothers only; another with fathers only; and a third with mothers and fathers together. The sensitivity of responses to the context of a focus group can raise concern about response validity, or the "truthfulness" of participants. However, answers that shift with shifting contexts need not point to poor validity. They more likely point to an opportunity for insight.

How are participant-observation methods different from focus group interviews? For one thing, participant-observation methods are usually much less "contrived" or formal than focus group interviews and allow for observation of group interaction in a more

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naturalistic environment. As such, participant observation may be better suited than focus groups to research related to reasons for attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example. On the other hand, focus groups might be particularly useful for exploring normative ideas about what it means to be a "good mother" among women with different employment experiences, a conversation likely difficult to observe in a naturalistic setting.

Because group discussion can seem natural and easy in daily life, it is reasonable to think that group interviews would be easy to orchestrate. But without explicit goals and careful planning, one is likely to end up with a scenario in which the moderator asks questions and the individuals sitting in a circle respond in turn, as in the following sample transcript:

Then the pattern repeats itself:

And so on.

This sample transcript mirrors an actual interview shared with me by another researcher puzzling over the lack of group interaction. The "don't know" responses indicate that each group member thought he or she was expected to give "an answer" as opposed to entering into a discussion. Focus groups in which there is limited verbal interaction fail to take advantage of the strength of the focus group design.

Fortunately, there are now numerous books that provide guidance on how to conduct focus groups (see the 6-volume *Focus Group Kit* published by Sage, for example; also Edmunds 1999; Greenbaum 2000; Krueger 1994; Morgan 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). They provide terrific detail on the mechanics of carrying out interviews, particularly structured group interviews in the United States, but tend to be less useful in helping social science researchers decide when focus groups are appropriate or how best to construct appropriate content. Those decisions require that researchers consider carefully their research question and how data collected in group interviews can best contribute to specific research goals.

Sorting Through Relationships

The relationship between the researcher and the research participants varies considerably among those who use focus groups. At one end of the continuum are those who hire professionals to conduct focus groups for them. While these researchers may set the inclusion criteria for the focus group **[p. 110 ↓]** interviews, it is unlikely they will ever meet the participants or see or listen to the interviews. If they have contact with participants at all, their contact will probably be limited to analyzing the transcripts of the sessions. Some researchers may choose to hire professional moderators because the researchers do not have the requisite language skills to conduct or observe the interviews. Or given that personal characteristics of the moderator, such as age, gender, and class, are known to influence the focus group discussion, a researcher may judge it inappropriate for him or her to moderate, or even observe, a particular group. Indeed, power and identity are critical to "access" in the collection of research materials (Harrington 2003).

> any group-based research activity that is grounded in regular interaction among the participants such that it becomes a social and political forum in its own right… [including] focused discussions in natural groupings, structured group exercises with targeted participants, and debate or activities facilitated by community members. (Baker & Hinton 1999, p. 79)

As participatory research methods gain acceptance in mainstream social science, it seems plausible that focus groups will increasingly be used as a tool to help formalize the incorporation of community members in research. At the same time, scholars caution that careful attention must be paid to power differentials in the design, execution, and analysis of these interviews (see, e.g., Baker & Hinton 1999). Participation does not necessarily produce co-representation.

It is not just relationships between researchers and participants that matter. The relationships among participants are an equally important design detail when planning focus group interviews. Researchers must decide whether homogeneous or heterogeneous groups best serve the research goals. This is **[p. 111 ↓]** a critical

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design issue for at least two reasons. First, group composition can affect elicitation, although perhaps not in as formulaic a way as once thought. Groups of like members can produce comfortable venues for expression. At the same time, groups of unlike members can generate disagreement and greater cause to explain individual points of view (Hollander 2004). Second, if group variation is used strategically, it has the potential to facilitate investigation of the ways in which social context shapes discussion of the issues under study.

Last, if groups are not observed in naturalistic settings, researchers also need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of recruiting individuals who know one another. While researchers used to favor strangers over acquaintances or intimates, more recently there is growing recognition that degree of familiarity is yet another aspect of interview context that can be manipulated systematically to achieve research goals. One research strategy may be to facilitate familiarity and shared history among participants who may not have known each other at the start of an interview. For example, Bohmer and Kirumira (2000) and Harrison, Xaba, and Kunene (2001) used repeated focus groups with adolescents over time to develop a context more conducive to discussion of sexual behavior.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues arise in the course of any research project. Several that pertain to group interviews deserve specific mention. The first is confidentiality. In individual interviews, researchers have a high degree of control over the information that is shared during the course of an interview. As part of any informed consent procedure, they can elaborate what will and will not be done with this information. In group interviews, participants are usually asked to agree to keep information confidential. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, for any researcher to enforce confidentiality.

Dynamics during the interviews, as they relate to confidentiality, can also be especially complicated when participants know each other. For example, it can be difficult to prevent participants from making disclosures about others in the group. When they do so, they may reveal information that other group members would have chosen to keep private.

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At the same time, Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) argue that, whenever possible, "sensitive moments" should not be suppressed. They note that such situations can be analytically useful in the research process because they serve to map out the boundaries of acceptable discourse (p. 156). A unique challenge for focus group researchers is the need to protect the welfare of **[p. 112 ↓]** participants while at the same time creating a safe space for sensitive moments in discussion.

Next Steps

The available manuals and books can be very helpful for planning and executing focus group research. Morgan (1997), in particular, is a straightforward treatment and a good introduction. It reflects more of a social science orientation than some of the other "how-to" books. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) will appeal to those with no or little experience using focus group techniques, as well as those who already use them. It is an edited volume that features examples of research with focus groups. Interactionist in orientation, many of the chapters address methodological questions concerning focus group interviews. Morgan and Krueger's (1998) the *Focus Group Kit* is oriented to research in the United States. It may be useful as a reference for researchers thinking through specific organizational issues, such as how to craft invitation letters and whether to serve food.

Analysis of Focus Group Data

The analysis of focus group data is an underdeveloped area in sociological research methods. Handbooks for the analysis of qualitative data more generally might be useful. Volume 6 in the *Focus Group Kit* (Krueger 1998) addresses the topic of analysis. However, while it is written for focus groups specifically, much of the volume highlights in bullet format general principles related to analysis rather than specific strategies for the analysis of focus group interviews. Basic coding of content is addressed in Frankland and Bloor (1999); analysis of sensitive moments in Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999); and conversation analysis in Myers and Macnaghten (1999).

Nuanced analysis of focus group data ideally takes into account the group aspect of the interview (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell 2000). As the field increasingly moves toward software for textual analysis, how best to incorporate the group in analysis will require careful consideration; narrative thread can be especially complex in group interviews. Interruptions, the absence of material, and sequencing of comments can complicate analysis, as can the insertion of observational data. Yet these challenges deserve systematic consideration.

Let me close with one observation and one practical suggestion. First, the location of focus group research on the quantitative-qualitative research continuum is a factor that leads to criticism of the method. There are those **[p. 113 ↓]** who dismiss focus group techniques because they are often conducted with a nonrandom sample of individuals, and so inferences to a population cannot be drawn easily; or, generalizability, a characteristic of research highly valued by quantitative researchers, is not met. At the same time, others criticize focus group techniques because they fall short by ethnographic standards. There is often very little individual-specific context. Research participants are essentially abstracted from the social landscape, coming together in an unnatural environment to contemplate issues not typically discussed by strangers. I hope this chapter has served to clarify why one might use focus group interviews. Focus group techniques are not inherently good or bad; their value and appropriateness depend on how they are integrated into a research project.

Finally, I offer a practical suggestion. To determine whether focus group interviews are an appropriate data collection technique for your qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method project, it might be helpful to think about the broadest range of group techniques possible. In order to gather relevant information when reviewing the literature on focus groups, consider search terms that include "group interviews," "group discussions," "focused interviews," and "focused group interviews." Even if you plan highly structured focus group interviews, the materials from this broader set of research techniques may be helpful in developing your project.

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