

Review:

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Abstract: This book is an introductory text that situates focus groups within the social science context and provides basic guidelines for preparing and conducting focus groups as well as analyzing the data. This book is not meaty and should not be used as the sole means for focus group guidance. Moreover, there are some key concepts regarding sampling and uses for focus group research that are missing from this book. Therefore, while it provides functional information for the researcher new to focus group studies, this book is not a stand-alone guide. An undergraduate survey course in research methods, however, would benefit greatly from this overview on focus groups.

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1. Overview

The authors of the text, Michael BLOOR, Jane FRANKLAND, Michelle THOMAS and Kate ROBSON provide a concise and interesting look at the history, purpose and functionality of focus groups. The practice of using focus groups in research began in American marketing (FERN, 2001) in the middle of the 20th century. It was not until the 80's and 90's, however, that the social sciences began to capitalize on the usefulness of focus groups. This text provides a brief history of focus groups and then compares the purposes of various types of research in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 details focus group constitution and sampling procedures. In Chapter 3, operational issues are discussed such as participant payment, informed consent, debriefing and role of the moderator. Data analysis, including transcription, methods and reporting the results, is found in Chapter 4. Chapter 5

launches a discourse on virtual focus groups, providing fodder for interesting debate on the definition of "virtual" focus groups. The conclusion in Chapter 6 is merely a summary of Chapters 1-5 and does not pose questions to the reader, nor does it suggest future directions of focus group research. [1]

1.1 Trends and uses

The first chapter begins with a brief look at focus group research in marketing in the 1940s. The authors recount the familiar story of MERTON's experimental focus groups with 12 people in a radio studio. Participants would have a red button and green button at their disposal and would be asked to press the red button if they were responding negatively to the questions/comments and green if they felt positive. Because this procedure merely broke comments into negative and positive, MERTON developed an interviewing process for groups that has evolved into what we know today as focus group interviews. Continuing, BLOOR et al. explain that due to the stresses in marketing, the public sector spun off from marketing firms and began to utilize focus groups for more public-centered purposes, such as public health campaigns. [2]

The chapter emphasizes the importance of focus groups in studying group norms and dynamics because of the ambiguity associated with normative group behaviors. Next, the authors provide examples of how focus group research can be used in supplementary ways. For example, focus groups can be used to pilot work, to give context to survey design, to provide interpretation and understanding of survey results and to offer dialogue with research participants that encourages feedback as well as new insights. Importantly, BLOOR and colleagues discuss how focus group findings can be used to expand or even challenge findings in survey studies. Perhaps most significantly, the chapter furnishes a clear explanation of triangulation along with an emphasis that focus groups should not be used for validation functions. To spotlight the value of focus groups, the authors provide examples of how such data can aid in multi-method studies. The chapter ends with a comparative chart of focus groups and other research methods. [3]

1.2 Group composition

Chapter 2 proves to take a common sense approach to participant selection and sampling. It provides scenarios to illustrate not only the need for diversity in the groups, but also what can happen if a group is too diverse. BLOOR et al. also advise piloting group structures, if at all possible, in order to secure the best type of composition representative of the study's research goals. Again with examples and excerpts from real focus groups, the chapter warns against the misconception that successful groups consist only of people who are strangers only to each other. Factors to consider are the type and level of self-disclosure that may come about based on composition and how useful or injurious this may be to the focus group discussion. [4]

The text weighs the advantages and disadvantages of strangers and non-strangers participating in discussion groups together and then depicts what can happen if there is too much disclosure among group members. For example, other participants may feel uncomfortable or they may reveal information that they would not otherwise reveal. Potentially, in a group where members know each other well, feelings could change toward a participant if s/he over-discloses. On the other hand, by reducing uncertainty through heavy disclosures, other participants may feel relieved to be able to disclose at a deep level. The main concern of the moderator, however, should be that confidentiality is maintained as much as possible. [5]

Finally, group size is considered in terms of the research focus and goals as well as the number of focus groups needed. Participant recruitment is discussed in terms of drawing names from a survey sample or eliciting participants at a sampling site. Due to its labor-intensive process, verbal recruitment is not recommended. The process of informed consent is clearly explained and its importance underscored. Lastly, participant reminders (i.e., reminder telephone calls the night before) and financial compensation end the chapter. [6]

1.3 Preparation and the actual discussion groups

The authors stress the importance of context and the fact that no matter what setting is chosen for the focus groups, it will somehow impact on the discussion. BOOR et al. insist that the focus groups be audio recorded. With researchers recording all pertinent details, there is no need, therefore, to have separate facilitators and transcribers/note takers. Additionally, accuracy of the actual focus group discussion is much higher when recorded. Next, focusing exercises are explained via examples of ranking, vignettes, news bulletins and photo interpretations. Advantages and disadvantages of focusing exercises are offered. [7]

Next, the role of the moderator is described as facilitator rather than controller. This is elaborated through maintaining a balance: not leading the group, but also not allowing individual group members to dominate. Moderators are advised to stress that no individual answer or input is wrong. Even handling silence is addressed in this chapter, since the possibility of a silent focus group is surely a fear for any moderator. Additionally, BLOOR and co-authors caution against focus groups lasting more than two hours. They warn that, after two hours, most people are tired and, therefore, the probability of the emergence of useful information is greatly reduced. They also discuss payment for participants and what is considered appropriate. [8]

The chapter ends by stressing debriefing as another reason not to run over time. Debriefing is the time that participants can ask questions and be reminded that their comments will remain confidential. As a courtesy, the researcher may remind group members that they can obtain a copy of the results after the data has been analyzed. [9]

1.4 Data analysis

In Chapter 4, BLOOR et al. accentuate the necessity of audio taping and transcribing the data. Although some notable authors (e.g. KRUEGER, 1994; 1998; & MORGAN, 1998a) of focus group research suggest that transcription is sometimes unnecessary, BLOOR and colleagues respond quite strongly: "Attempts at analysis without transcription will lead to loss of much of the richness of the data and will risk a selective and superficial analysis" (p.59). They discuss various issues of transcription, such as trying to get every word, noting when different speakers interrupt and overlap and trying to capture "real" language versus "sanitized" speech. For example, it becomes important to indicate that a speaker said, "He don't know," rather than "He doesn't know." [10]

In the analysis section of the chapter, "indexing" is presented first. This is explained in terms of labeling, similar to chapter headings and subheadings. Secondly, the aid of computer programs such as NUD*IST are briefly introduced as ways of managing the data in the analysis stage. Finally, the two methods of analysis, *analytic induction* and *logical analysis*, are detailed. Analytic induction is explained as a way to arrive at explanatory hypotheses that are then compared to each case. If deviant cases are found, the hypothesis is either revised or the definition of phenomenon is expanded or modified. Further, each revision of a hypothesis is based on the preceding hypothesis. The second type of analysis, logical induction, is explained, although this method has not been applied to focus group data. The chapter ends with a few tips on reporting findings. For example, MYERS and MACNAGHTEN (1999) suggest that longer quotations, rather than shorter ones, should be used in order to contextualize the speakers' meanings. [11]

1.5 Virtual focus groups

This chapter carries focus group research into the future by delineating the authors' definition of "virtual focus group." The chapter gives examples of both recent virtual focus groups and their special considerations and struggles as well as "netiquette," or ethical guidelines to follow when "harvesting" data from online sources. Guiding principles for online discussions are presented, along with instructions for gaining good, usable data. Finally, strengths and weaknesses of virtual groups are compared and contrasted. While the positive aspects of virtual focus groups—lower costs, more convenience to all participating and a greater access to a more diverse population—outweigh the weaknesses, the negatives need to be considered as well. Weaknesses include difficulty in detecting deceit, Internet-user bias and complexity in establishing rapport, not to mention lack of nonverbal communication cues. [12]

1.6 Conclusion

The last chapter merely summarizes the first five chapters and does not present any new information. Its context is extremely important, however, re-emphasizing the focus group purpose throughout the chapter. Focus groups are situated in the context of research design in multi-methods studies, BLOOR et al. caution us,

however, to be aware of the limitations of focus group research and to be careful not "overstate their usefulness or understate their frailties" (p.98). [13]

2. Assessment

Chapter 1 provides a good overview of focus group research. Perhaps, however, a little more historical background would have strengthened the opening section. The strength of Chapter 1 is the excellent discussion of group norms and how focus groups can be used as a stand-alone method of better understanding the functionality of groups. There are especially good examples in the chapter of focus groups, complementing other methods. BLOOR et al. discuss the use of focus groups in supporting survey design, interpreting survey results and facilitating the feedback process to participants. Surprisingly, the text fails to mention other important uses for focus groups. MERTON and KENDAL (1946) discuss the use of focus groups to generate hypotheses. In addition, FERN (2001) lists additional uses, including model and theory development as well as program and evaluation research. [14]

While BLOOR et al. argue that focus group data do not provide validation of survey findings, MERTON and KENDAL (1946) insisted that focus group results can indeed provide verification that survey results are accurate. Additionally, BLOOR and colleagues forthrightly argue against the view that triangulation is "a procedure for replication within social settings," asserting that "this positivist view of triangulation is mendacious" (p.12). I am troubled by such an extremist position, *particularly* considering the qualitative methodology of focus group research. The section would be improved if several positions on triangulation vis a vis validation and/or verification were presented. In short, the reader should note that this text's approach is quite conservative regarding the limitation of focus group data. [15]

BLOOR et al. provide a conventional approach to participant recruitment and selection in Chapter 2. The informed consent section, arguably the most important aspect of a focus group study because of the ethical implications of human subjection protection, is explained well. Moreover, the scenarios and excerpts draw attention to the need for careful thought in determining a group's composition. Unfortunately, this chapter offers a narrow view of recruiting participants in stark contrast to other guides, such as the one by MORGAN (1998b), who detail various methods including existing lists, random sampling, intercepts, referrals and open solicitation. Additionally, the authors seem to have missed the mark in some of their assertions. "The use of payment for participation in qualitative research is rarely considered, usually through fear that this will introduce bias" (p.34); this statement sharply contrasts with the majority of other leading guides available. While most researchers would agree that out-of-pocket expenses such as train fare or mileage should come out of project funds, MORGAN (1998a); KRUEGER (1988); and VAUGHN, SCHUMM and SINAGUB (1996), among others, strongly encourage payment to research subjects. [16]

Less controversial, Chapter 3's information on focusing exercises offers "breaking the ice" strategies unmentioned in many other texts and I find this refreshing. Also, I think BLOOR et al. do a good job in describing the role and duties of the moderator as one who needs to facilitate, rather than lead or control, the discussion. On the other hand, there is little offered in terms of question development. The paragraphs discussing what can cause silences and how to handle group members unwilling to talk is valuable to those new to focus group research. Finally, the debriefing section highlights and reemphasizes ethical considerations when dealing with human subjects. [17]

Chapter 4 discusses data analysis. Quite significantly, the authors go to great lengths to stress the necessity of transcribing the data for more accurate analysis, rather than relying on researcher notes alone. Unfortunately, the methods of analysis offered are narrow in scope. Grounded theory (CRESWELL, 1998), perhaps the most widely used tradition in qualitative research, is completely overlooked. [18]

Lastly, Chapter 5 introduces the concept of virtual focus groups. BLOOR et al. take a stab at explaining the notion, but fail to offer solid distinctions between real-time computer-mediated communication (CMC) discussions and on-line bulletin boards/on-line interviews. In fact, the authors use MURRAY's (1997) virtual focus groups, which ran for about 4 weeks, as examples of focus groups but, disappointingly, do not adequately explain the notion of "threads." In addition, they do not explain how "threading" does not constitute a focus group at all because many participants do not respond to many of the threads that the moderator/manager posts. Sometimes participants respond solely to the moderator's questions/comments, without addressing other participants' comments, unlike face-to-face focus group interaction. Finally, the authors fall short in explaining asynchronous and synchronous communication, which are very different means of CMC. Regrettably, BLOOR et al., are not alone, however, for hardly any studies have distinguished among these two types of CMC (WEISGERBER, 2000). [19]

Most lamentable is their failure to explain sufficiently ethical considerations in cyberspace. They quote Barbara SHARF's article, "Beyond Netiquette" and yet do not advise the reader to be careful when collecting data from support groups discussing sensitive topics, such as breast cancer recovery or addiction. Nor do they furnish instructions on how to gain entry into these groups and the ethical dilemma of disclosing research intentions while still obtaining "naturalistic" data. Lastly, Chapter 6 provides some compensation for other shortcomings in the book, for it wraps up the main points of the book rather concisely without missing any key concepts. [20]

3. Relevance

Focus Groups in Social Research is a handy "how to" book on focus groups, written on an undergraduate level and very suitable as an overview for research methods courses. This book should not be used as the sole guide to focus groups in graduate classes or by a new researcher because of the lack of some important considerations outlined above. [21]

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