2

Uses for Focus Groups

IN THIS CHAPTER

Basic Issues

Basic Issues

All four of the examples in Chapter 1 describe "stand-alone" or self-contained focus groups. That is, each of them was designed to be a complete research project without any connection to another method, either qualitative or quantitative. This chapter begins with uses for self-contained focus groups, followed by a comparison to individual interviews along with a discussion of ways to combine individual and group interviews. The last section in the body of the chapter considers some of the criticisms of focus groups. The "Advanced Topics" section of the chapter describes **mixed methods** designs in which focus groups, as a qualitative method, are combined with a quantitative method.

Learning the Participants' Perspectives

In broad terms, the use of focus groups is to hear about participants' perspectives. The term *perspectives* is used purposefully for its breadth, since it captures a wide range of ideas such as perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. In essence, it represents

how participants think about the research topic. It is important to recognize, however, that these perspectives are dynamic, as opposed to predetermined aspects of the participants' thinking that can be tapped into through group interaction. It is not uncommon for participants to shift their perspectives during the course of the group discussion itself, as they encounter a variety of other points of view or as they consider their own thoughts more explicitly than they normally would.

Beyond perspectives as a more cognitive dimension, focus groups are also useful for hearing about participants' experiences. Once again, however, it is important not to think of those experiences as fixed, inflexible things that are simply waiting to be described during the course of the discussion. Instead, there is also a dynamic dimension to the ways people interpret their past, and the discussion itself can have an impact on that interpretation. For example, in the focus groups on seeking a diagnosis for dementia, the opening question we asked the caregivers concerned the first symptoms that they could remember noticing in their family member. As people described the earliest ways that the dementia became apparent, one of them responded with surprise, "Oh, my mom did that, and it started months before what I said earlier, so I guess that must have really been her first symptoms." The point here is that the participants' understanding of what really happened is open to change, and the focus group itself can be a source of that change.

Regardless of whether a researcher is interested in the participants' perspectives or experiences or both, the key thing that focus groups reveal is patterns of similarities and differences among the participants. Chapter 1 talked about this in terms of uncovering the extent of consensus and diversity, as well as learning not just what participants think but why they think that way. The source of this insight is the need for participants to explain themselves to each other. In order to maintain a comprehensible conversation, each person's contribution to the discussion must make sense in terms of what has just been said. Hence, when someone expresses a different perspective or recounts a different set of experiences, that person needs to minimize any potential discrepancy so that his or her new contribution fits into the conversation. For the participants, this kind of interaction maintains a smoothly developing discussion. For the researcher, it provides not only information about the ways that the participants are similar and different but also insights into the sources of those similarities and differences.

The participants' ability to use these interactive tools also makes it possible to conduct relatively unstructured interviews. Chapter 4 will offer more detail on less structured and more structured approaches to focus groups, but the central point is that **less structured groups** require less guidance from the moderator. In this case, the participants essentially manage their own discussion. This type of group requires a fairly high level of engagement among the participants with a research topic that is highly meaningful to them. A good example is the group of recent widows, which addressed only one question ("What kinds of things have made it easier or harder . . .") and in which the moderator took a highly detached role. These less structured interviews give the researcher an opportunity to "listen and learn" about the participants' perspectives and experiences.

While it is certainly possible to do less structured individual interviews (e.g., Spradley, 1979/2016), this typically requires very careful planning, so that the less structure there is in an individual interview, the more prior effort there has to be. In contrast, the ability to rely on interactive dynamics makes less structured interviewing a relatively straightforward option in focus groups. Of course, most projects will not be as unstructured as the widowhood example, in which there was a single question and an uninvolved moderator; still it is quite possible to have only a few questions with the moderator doing little more than asking the questions and taking notes during the discussion.

Just because focus groups have an advantage for doing less structured interviews does not limit their value for more researcher-directed projects. In particular, it is quite possible to get participants' responses to topics that come from the researcher's perspective. This kind of work is easiest when the participants have a reasonable amount of experience with the topic, so that they have ready responses to the subjects that interest the research. Even so, it is still possible to generate productive discussions of "take for granted" topics. For example, in the groups on "who has heart attacks and why," the questions we asked were designed to elicit stories, which in turn helped the participants gain insights into their own thinking.

One specific use for focus groups that relies on getting participants' reactions is the development of media and other related material. For example, a nonprofit organization might have a brochure that they want to send to potential new members, or a local government agency might be creating a public service announcement. A classic application of this approach is to gather responses to preliminary drafts or comparisons across

BOX 2.1
POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AS A SPECIFIC USE FOR FOCUS GROUPS

One specialized use of focus groups is hearing participants' responses to political candidates and ballot initiatives. A common objective in this kind of research is to construct advertising that would have an impact on swing voters who do not already have a commitment one way or another. From a campaign's point of view, there is little point in understanding voters who are already solidly in one camp or another, so the purpose is to find out what kinds of arguments or styles of presentation might move someone who is indeed potentially moveable.

For better or worse, this work is notably successful at using focus groups to generate negative messages and attack ads. As an example of using focus groups this way, the 1988 U.S. presidential election featured a well-known attack ad against the democratic candidate who, while serving as a governor, had allowed a convicted murderer named Willie Horton to be freed from prison. In this case, the focus groups were used to test a variety of topics and find the one that produced the most anger among a carefully targeted set of voters. (See Morgan & Fellows, 2008, for more discussion of the so-called "Willie Horton ad.")

alternative versions of the material, which often involves requests for "what if" thinking, such as, "What if we did it this way instead of that way, what difference would that make?" Similarly, marketing research relies heavily on reactions to advertising, packaging, and so on, and the same is true of social marketing (e.g., Bruneau & Campbell, 2001), where the goal is to promote prosocial behavior, rather than to sell products.

Self-contained focus groups can thus serve a wide range of goals, with a great deal of variation in the extent to which the intent is to hear about either the participants' perspectives or their reactions to the researcher's topics. As such, they are a general-purpose method that can be adapted for many different purposes. Whenever the reason for the research is to learn about participants' perspectives and experiences, there is a good chance that focus groups will be an appropriate method.

Comparisons to and Combinations With Individual Interviews

Comparing Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

In thinking about the uses for focus groups, the most likely alternative choice would be individual interviews, and there have been head-to-head comparisons of focus groups and individual interviewing. For example, Fern (1982) used an "idea generation" format to show that individual interviews produced more suggestions about the topic of expanding women's roles in the military. That is, four individual interviews would generate more ideas than a four-person focus group. This corresponds to consistent findings in the social psychological research on brainstorming that a set of individuals produces more ideas, of equal or better quality, than an equivalent sized group (see review in Stroebe, Nijstad, & Rietzschel, 2010). More fine-grained analysis of these brainstorming sessions strongly suggests that the difference is due to "process loss," because the time groups spend on friendly interaction and discussion back and forth is not devoted to idea generation (as compared to an individual working alone to produce a list).

There is, however, an important limitation to these studies: they are purposefully limited to producing countable responses ("ideas") to relatively straightforward requests. This is quite different from the goals of hearing about participants' perspectives and experiences regarding a topic. Indeed, it is quite different from the usual reasons for doing qualitative research, such as theory building or seeking meaning and understanding. In essence, this approach represents a trade-off between limiting the research task to producing something countable (and thus comparable across the types of interviews) and matching the typical purposes and procedures in either individual or group interviews. This raises the problem of how one would go about comparing processes such as meaning making in individual interviews and groups, and it is quite likely that this question is irresolvable, but see the discussion in the next section on the work of Wight (1994).

A different, more straightforward comparison between the two formats concerns the level of depth and detail that they provide with regard to the individual participants. This is a matter of basic arithmetic, since a 90-minute focus group with six participants will produce approximately 15 minutes of talk-time per participant, compared to the one-hour length of an individual interview. The trade-off is between

the amount of information about each person that an individual interview produces and the range of different points of view that come out in a focus group. Thus, rather than thinking about this as merely a matter of arithmetic, it is more useful to concentrate on the different strengths of the two interview formats. When the goal is to learn about each person through extended narratives, individual interviews are favorable. When the goal is to learn about consensus and diversity, focus groups are favorable. One potential compromise between these two positions is the dyad interview, in which the presence of just two participants generates both more detail about each person's perspective and the opportunity for interactive sharing and comparing between them.

Finally, it is almost always easier to recruit and set up individual interviews. As Chapter 1 noted, focus groups have a weakness in terms of the need to assemble a number of participants who all meet some specific set of criteria. This need to bring a group of eligible participants together at the same place and time is more demanding than finding and talking to people one person at a time. In addition, if a focus group fails because not enough people attend, this is a more severe problem than if one person misses her or his individual interview. The lesson here is that focus groups are more demanding for a variety of logistical reasons, so if individual interviews and focus groups are likely to be equally productive for a given purpose, then sheer practicality may well favor individual interviews.

Combining Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

Focus groups and individual interviews are often complementary rather than competing methods. In particular, it can make sense to use individual interviews as either an input or a follow-up to focus groups. In the first case, preliminary individual interviews with **key informants** can be a valuable source of information for both selecting participants and writing effective **interview guides**. The strategy is to find experts who can provide crucial advice, and this is especially important with research that involves new categories of participants or unfamiliar topics. For example, both the studies on widowhood and dementia caregiving began with expert interviews with participants who were support group leaders. This choice of key informants reflected the extent of their knowledge about the topic in question and their awareness of how these issues played out in group settings. Alternately, it is also possible to use focus groups as a way to generate a guide for individual interviewing (Pederson, Delmar, Falkmer, & Gronkjaer, 2016).

In studies that use follow-up individual interviews, the most common design is to conduct the interviews with carefully selected focus group participants. This approach takes advantage of the strengths that individual interviews have in depth and detail so that people who had interesting things to say in the focus groups can be heard at greater length. For example, Duncan and Morgan (1994) did a different set of interviews related to dementia caregiving. The initial focus groups demonstrated the range of perspectives among the participants, which led to individual interviews with a smaller subset of those participants based on what they had said in earlier groups.

A different reason for follow-up interviews is what is known as "member checking" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a process whereby researchers take tentative findings back to a set of participants to get their responses. Member checking can employ individual interviews to follow up on focus groups or vice versa. For example, if the project relied on focus groups, it would be possible to select a set of the previous participants to take part in individual interviews about the results from analyzing those focus groups. Alternatively, several of the participants from an earlier set of individual interviews could be brought together in a focus group to give their reactions to the researcher's provisional conclusions.

Overall, these combinations of individual interviews and focus groups fall into a category known as multimethod or multiple method research (as opposed to mixed methods, which brings together a qualitative and a quantitative method). These opportunities for creating designs that integrate different qualitative methods indicate that there does not need to be an either-or choice between focus groups and individual interviews. Instead, there are several ways to take advantage of the strengths of both methods within one research project.

Criticisms of Focus Groups

Group Influences

One of the most common arguments against focus groups is that the group will influence what individual participants say. That is undoubtedly the case, but the whole point of focus groups is to hear people in interaction rather than in isolation. The real question is whether this is truly a limitation. Bristol and Fern (1996) and Morrison (1998) provide literature reviews on the critique of focus groups based on "group influences," but it is important to consider the specific literature that they cite. In particular, recall that Fern's research is on idea generation, while Morrison concentrates on studies from the field that rely on differences between individual and group decision making. Both of these areas typically involve artificial situations where the participants have a low level of engagement with the topic. Hence, whatever these studies say about the nature of group influences in those settings is unlikely to be transferable to equivalent knowledge about how the group setting exerts an influence on focus groups.

A deeper problem here concerns the assumption that group influences are a negative factor that should be avoided. Implicit in this criticism is an apparent belief that it would be preferable to obtain the data outside of a group, presumably in an individual interview. But the idea that individual interviews provide some kind of "gold standard" for accuracy or validity is questionable on at least two grounds. First, this claim ignores that individual interviewing itself is a context, which also has an influence on what participants do or do not say. Indeed, it would be just as sensible to argue that the heightened influence of the interviewer in these settings is a limitation, in comparison to the "strength in numbers" that comes from interacting with peers in a focus group.

The second problem with arguing that the responses in individual interviews are somehow better than the data from focus groups is the failure to specify what "better" would mean. All too often, there seems to be an assumption that group influences keep focus group participants from expressing their "true" attitudes, but this presumes that people have stable, context-free attitudes. A more reasonable approach would be to treat attitudes as relatively flexible constructs that are situation dependent, so that individual interviews and focus groups each generate different kinds of influences on what people will or won't say. Unfortunately, there is relatively little actual research on this issue, with the study by Wight (1994) in Box 2.2 providing the most interesting example (see also Coenen, Stamm, Stucki G., & Ciez, 2012; Kaplowitz, 2000; Kaplowitz & Hoehn, 2001).

Taking the extremes of context into account might lead to the conclusion that individual interviews would be preferable in situations where people typically keep their

BOX 2.2
CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS PRE- AND POST-INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Wight (1994) conducted four sets of interviews with adolescent males to hear how they talked about sex. Half the sessions began with individual interviews followed by focus groups with the same youths; the other half of the sessions reversed this order by having the participants start in focus groups before shifting to individual interviews. The research question was whether the participants expressed a single, unitary set of attitudes across all four interview settings or whether something about either the format or the ordering of the interviews had an effect on what the participants said.

Three of the four sets of interviews produced similar sets of results, with the participants making self-assertive statements about their sexual abilities, without any need to consider their female partners' perspectives. Both sets of focus groups produced this boastful behavior, which carried over into the set of individual interviews that followed the focus groups. The one exception

occurred when the participants talked in individual interviews prior to the focus groups, in which case they acknowledged notably more sensitivity to the point of view of their female partners.

One likely interpretation is that these young men felt a need to promote a self-centered approach to sex when they were interacting with other adolescent males, and once these participants had made boastful claims, they continued to present this persona in the following set of individual interviews. In contrast, when their first conversation was an individual contact with the older male interviewer, they engaged in a more balanced "respectable" self-presentation, which they readily abandoned when interacting in front of their peers. If this interpretation makes sense, then conducting only individual interviews or focus groups would have produced two contradictory sets of results, neither of which would have fully captured the range of attitudes that these youths were capable of expressing.

behavior private, whereas focus groups would be preferable for hearing about things that occur in social settings. This is probably too narrow a view, however. Another approach would be to think about how comfortable participants would feel about talking to their peers on a subject versus how they would feel talking to a stranger, with the recognition that those two settings might well produce different statements.

Do People Really Know What They Want or Like?

A very different criticism of focus groups is that participants can't really report on the things that focus groups seek to understand. The most recent version of this critique comes from Malcom Gladwell (2005) in his book *Blink*. According to this argument, most people form their preferences unconsciously and incredibly quickly ("in the blink of an eye"), as opposed to the discussion in focus groups, which consists of self-conscious rationalizations. In this case, there is empirical evidence that laboratory testing of preferences that occur below the conscious level are more predictive of actual choices.

This claim is persuasive so long as it is limited to things like simple preferences, and as such it may be relevant to things like purchasing decisions in marketing research. But once again, this object of study is a poor match for the most common purposes of social science focus groups. In essence, the goal is to get inside people's heads to understand (with a non-Freudian approach) unconscious "depth." This is a content-free approach, where understanding people's perspectives or hearing about their experiences is irrelevant. All that matters is the ability to predict individual behavior in a rather limited set of circumstances.

This is not just a critique of focus groups but of all methods that rely on hearing about attitudes, and as such, it applies equally well to individual interviews and survey questionnaires. Ultimately, it is an issue of how well attitudes predict behavior, and that is a fair question. Very simple purchasing decisions may occur in a yes-or-no, context-free world. In contrast, most meaningful behavior happens in a much more complex way, and this complexity is what more traditional social science methods study. In this world, the gap between people's attitudes about what they will do and their actual behavior is something that we need to investigate, and focus groups are a useful tool for this purpose.

Advanced Topics

Mixed Methods and Focus Groups

As noted above, the field of mixed methods research involves studies that contain both a qualitative and a quantitative design. Here, that would combine focus groups with either survey research or program interventions. Interestingly, the earliest work on focus groups (see Merton & Kendall, 1946, pp. 556–557) was heavily tied to quantitative methods, and when Merton (1987) considered the direction focus groups had taken since then, he was dubious about the use of what we would call "stand-alone" focus groups. Today, we would think of using focus groups as either a stand-alone

method or as a component in a mixed methods study as a choice that depends on the research goals. Similarly, the choice about how to use focus groups in a mixed methods design depends on the purpose that this qualitative method serves within the overall project, and this section will present two options in that regard.

Focus Groups as Inputs to Quantitative Research

Survey questionnaires and program interventions can often benefit from a preliminary set of focus groups to help create the content for those quantitative methods. This is particularly likely when dealing with new topics or new populations. Focus groups can make a range of different contributions in this role, including early, *discovery*-oriented work; further *development* of existing information; and final-stage *definition* of applications (for more detail, see Morgan, 2013, especially Chapter 6).

Discovery is an effective use of focus groups when relatively little is known about either the research topic or the target population. In this case, the strengths of focus groups for unstructured, exploratory research are especially relevant, because they maximize the ability to hear about the participants' perspectives and experiences. For surveys, this kind of input is notably useful when it is not clear what kinds of questions should be asked in order to cover a topic; for program interventions, it is equally useful when little is known about the group members who will be receiving the services. Either way, the point is to get the quantitative study started in the right direction.

When the purpose for preliminary focus groups is development, the quantitative portion of the project is at a stage that requires further improvement before it can be put into the field. In this case, the interview questions will usually involve a semi-structured approach that allows the participants to talk freely about the researcher's choice of topics. For surveys, this approach makes it possible to hear how participants think about and talk about the subjects that will become items in the questionnaires; for programs, it aids in learning how to increase the effectiveness of various elements of the intervention.

Finally, definition addresses the last refinements that are necessary before the quantitative study begins. In this case, the focus groups will usually be more structured, which emphasizes hearing about the researcher's interests in the participants' words. For surveys, the typical goal of the definition stage is to perfect wording for specific items; for programs, this kind of input refines the service that will be delivered.

Only rarely will quantitative studies need all three of these forms of qualitative input. Instead, each project will have specific needs that will determine the ways that focus groups can provide the most beneficial inputs.

Focus Groups as Follow-Ups to Quantitative Research

In follow-up studies, the goal is to extend the results from a survey or program intervention to produce more insight than would have been possible with the quantitative method alone. Once again, focus groups can serve multiple purposes in this combination of methods. On the one hand, they can be useful for *investigating* poorly

understood results; on the other hand, they can be useful for *illustrating* (for more detail, see Morgan, 2013, especially Chapter 8).

When investigating quantitative studies that did not match the predicted outcomes, follow-up focus groups can increase understanding of how and why the results came out the way they did. Among the uses with surveys, follow-up focus groups can reveal other variables that should have been taken into account, or they can help explain the sources of outliers that reduced the fit of statistical models. For programs, poorly understood results usually mean nonsignificant outcomes, and focus groups can reveal factors that reduced either the implementation or impact of the intervention.

When illustrating results that match initial expectations, the overall goal is still to understand how and why the quantitative portion of the project had its effects. From a quantitative point of view, this provides validation for the original predictions about how the predicted processes actually operate in the lives of participants. In addition, this kind of depth and detail can help put a human face to what would otherwise be dry data.

In many ways, using focus groups to follow up on quantitative methods is a win-win situation, because it provides added value in situations where the results either do or do not match expectations. Of course, most large-scale quantitative studies are complex enough that they often produce a range of results, some of which are closer to prediction than others, in which case the flexibility of focus groups is especially useful.