

USING FOCUS GROUPS



Rosaline S Barbour



rose.barbour@open.ac.uk

The Open University

Conflicting Models



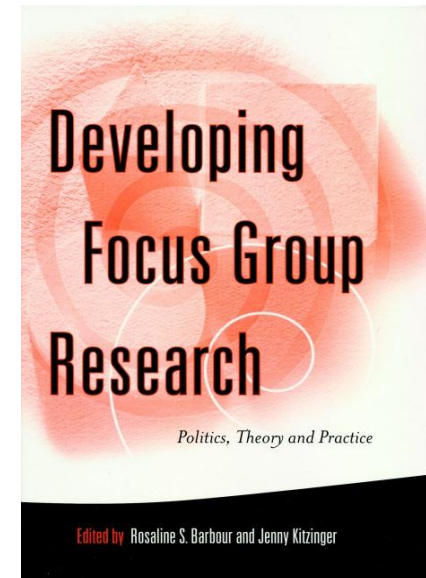
- Marketing Research
- Organizational R&D
- Community Development
- Health Services Research
- Social Sciences Research

Providing a Definition



“Any group discussion may be called a ‘focus group’ as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction.”

Barbour, R.S. & Kitzinger, J. (eds.)
**Developing Focus Group Research
& Politics, Theory & Practice**,
Sage: London, 1999.



"Structured Eavesdropping"



Sampling Choices

- Size?
- Number?
- Composition?
- Homogeneous OR heterogeneous groups?
- Naturally occurring OR researcher-convened groups?
- Homogeneous OR heterogeneous groups?
- One or more moderators?

Setting the scene for discussion

- Location & lay-out
- Topic guides
- Stimulus materials

Preparing for effective moderating

- Being attentive to the interaction, patterning and anticipating analysis

Research Design Choices

Adapting rather than Adopting Focus Groups



Perceived economies

- Focus groups as 'back door surveys'
- Focus groups as second-choice (substitute for ethnography or one-to-one 'gold standard' interviews)
- Naturalism Vs. artificiality

Capitalizing on full potential of focus groups

Defining Features of Focus Groups



- Allow for the study of interaction *between* participants
- May uncover *why* people think as they do
 - “Focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do.” (David Morgan, 1988)
- Can be especially useful for addressing *'why not?'* questions
- Can be useful in accessing *'hard to reach'* groups
- May give access to the *process* of opinion formation/handling of conflict/achieving of consensus

Claims Constraints and Cautions



- **Accessing experience**
- **Representation**
- **Empowerment**

“Focus groups are not the authentic Voice of the People, they are simply one more social research method, problematized by difficulties in recruitment, conduct and analysis: they cannot be used to authenticate findings in the name of the public.” (Bloor et al., 2001 *Focus Groups in Social Research*, London:Sage, page 15)

Focus Groups' Capacity to Illuminate the Process of Opinion Formation



Wilmot, S. & Ratcliffe, J. (2002) "Principles of distributive justice used by members of the general public in the allocation of donor liver grafts for transplantation: a qualitative study, *Health Expectations*, 5: 199-209.

Commentary:

This study was undertaken in order to illuminate survey findings. Discussion was elicited using 5 unfolding hypothetical scenarios and this exercise showed that reasoning in relation to the three principles of equity, efficiency/utility and desert was more complex than anticipated. Findings provided insights into how members of the public engaged thoughtfully and flexibly with the criteria involved.

Real Economies, Purposive Sampling and Potential for Comparison



Green, J.M., Draper, A.K., Dowler, E.A., Fele, G., Hagenhoff, V., Rusanen, M. and Rusanen, T. (2005) Public understanding of food risks in four European countries: a qualitative study, *European Journal of Public Health*, 15(5): 523-527.

Commentary:

Strategic sampling (in terms of including individuals at different life stages in Finland, Germany, Italy and the UK) here allowed the researchers to study public understanding of food risks in these contrasting international cultural contexts.

'Second stage' sampling - pay attention to individual voices'

- This may not even involve recruiting different participants
- simply configuring groups differently

Immediacy/Capturing the 'Zeitgeist' and exploring sensitive issues



Waller, J., Marlow, L.A.V., Wardle, J. (2006) Mothers' attitudes towards preventing cervical cancer through Human Papillomavirus Vaccination: a qualitative study, *Cancer Epidemiol. Biomarkers Prev.*, 15(7): 1257-1261.

Focus:

Differences in emphasis of groups held at different time points within the study - before after exposure to media coverage.

Commentary:

This highlights the capacity of focus groups to reflect rapid and incremental change in perspectives - one of the reasons why the method is favoured by marketing researchers.

Challenges in Analyzing Focus Group Data

Difficulties OR Resources?



- Variations between focus group sessions (settings, composition, group dynamics, moderators)
- Difficulty in interpreting silences
Importance of what is **NOT** said
- 'Slippery' views
"Attitudes are performed **NOT** pre-formed."
(Puchta & Potter, 2002, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(3): 345-363.)

The Applied-Theoretical Continuum

- 'A-priori' codes have their uses as does content analysis
- “...saying that the interaction in focus groups produces the data is not the same as saying that the interaction itself is the data”
[Morgan, D.L. \(2010\)](#) “Reconsidering the role of interaction in analyzing and reporting focus groups”, *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(5): 718-722.

It all depends on the aims of the research



The Potential of Hybrid Approaches

- Thematic Analysis
- Grounded Theory
- Frame Analysis
- Discursive psychology
- Conversation Analysis/Discourse Analysis

Halkier, B. (2010) "Focus groups as social enactments: integrating interaction and content in the analysis of focus group data", *Qualitative Research*, 10(1): 71-89



Concluding Advice

- Attend to research design issues
 - Maximize comparative potential
 - 'Saturation'; 'wildcard groups'
 - 2nd stage sampling; returning to the field
- Capitalize on participants' insights, but don't take these at face value
- Explore the potential of 'hybrid' approaches
 - to research design
 - to data analysis
- Be mindful of the political context

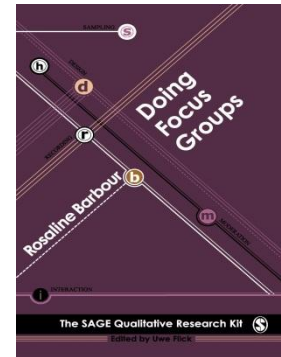
Some References

Barbour, R. (2008) *Doing Focus Groups*, London: Sage (Chaps 1 & 2 available online from www.sagepublications.co.uk)

Barbour, R.S. (2010) "Focus groups", in I. Bourgeault, R. Dingwall & R. de Vries (eds.) *Qualitative Health Research Practice*, London: Sage: pp.327-52.

Barbour, R.S. (in press) "Analyzing focus group data" in U. Flick(ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Analysis*, London: Sage.

Barbour, R. (in press) *Introducing Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, London: Sage ("Focus groups")



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OU Workshops: www.open.ac.uk/hsc-qualitative-research-methods