

# 1

---

## *Introduction*

### Focus Group History, Theory, and Practice

---

Among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences are group depth interviews, or focus groups. Originally called “focussed” (Merton’s preferred spelling) interviews (Merton & Kendall, 1946), this technique came into vogue after World War II and has been a part of the social scientist’s tool kit ever since. Focus groups emerged in behavioral science research as a distinctive member of the qualitative research family, which also includes individual depth interviewing, ethnographic participant observation, and projective methods, among others. Like its qualitative siblings, the popularity and status of focus groups among behavioral researchers has ebbed and flowed over the years, with distinctive patterns in particular fields. For example, in qualitative marketing studies, the use of focus groups has grown steadily for more than 50 years, and today, by one estimate, more than a quarter of a million focus groups are conducted annually in the United States alone (FocusVision, 2012). Also, focus groups no longer solely involve small research projects that rely on two or three groups meeting face-to-face in a small room. Focus groups are now conducted via webcams, in virtual worlds, by telepresence and through social media (McDermott, 2013). It is also common to conduct focus groups across the globe and in large numbers. Both Airbus and Boeing for example, conducted hundreds of focus groups all over the world to assist the development of their new planes, the A380 and 787, respectively (Babej & Pollack, 2006; Emerson, Johnson, & Koh, 2000).

In sociology, arguably the first field to embrace group research—qualitative research—flourished through the 1950s, faded away in the 1960s

and 1970s, and reemerged in the 1980s. It has been an important part of the social scientist's toolkit ever since. Various patterns of focus group ascendance, decline, and revival characterize other fields, yet it seems reasonable to conclude that focus group research has never enjoyed such widespread usage across an array of behavioral science disciplines and subfields as it does today. Technology that draws the world together and facilitates communication across time and space has provided new means for conducting focus groups, but the basic approach and benefits remain.

The diversity of research purposes, theories, and procedures that characterize the behavioral sciences suggests that focus groups will materialize differently in different fields. This, in fact, is the case, and it speaks to the versatility and productivity of focus group research. What is problematic with focus group research today, as the anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) observes, is an intellectual climate that reflects "substantially more concern with practice than theory" (p. 15). This is particularly the case in applied research, where dozens of articles and books tend to emphasize the dos and don'ts surrounding the myriad executional details involving recruiting participants, preparing discussion guides, selecting moderators, blocking time slots, inviting observers, ordering food, analyzing data, and preparing reports. As Rook (2003) observed, the stage management aspects of focus groups often preoccupy researchers to the extent that more basic issues are barely considered. In practice, researchers rarely step back to ask why they want to conduct research with groups rather than individuals, and why in a mirrored room instead of a natural setting? Answers to these and other questions can be found in closer examination of the nature and conduct of focus groups within the behavioral science disciplines from which they emerged.

### **Border Crossings: The Behavioral Science Origins of Focus Groups**

For almost 100 years, researchers in numerous behavioral science disciplines (both basic and applied) have relied on focus groups as a source of primary data. The fields that have—at various points in time—embraced research with groups include education, sociology, communications, the health sciences, organization behavior, program evaluation, psychotherapy, social psychology, gerontology, political science, policy research, sociology, anthropology, information systems, management, and marketing. The core concerns of these disciplines are obviously quite diverse, which suggests that focus groups are likely to be designed, fielded, and analyzed from very different perspectives and with different priorities. In other words, the underlying conceptual domain of any field influences how its researchers select samples and construct questions and how moderators probe responses and manage interactions among focus group participants.

The inevitable impact of substantive discipline-based theory on research practices stands in contrast to a tendency today to generalize a one-size-fits-all approach to using focus groups. Focus group methodology may be common to many disciplines, but its uses and applications are varied. This chapter seeks to examine the relationships between focus group theory and practice by identifying their primary historical sources and characterizing their prototypic research designs, which tend to vary dramatically according to their disciplinary origin.

As noted earlier, the lineage of focus group research is most commonly and directly traced to the 20th-century studies of persuasive communications and the effects of mass media that were conducted in the early 1940s. Table 1.1 provides a summary timeline of the development of group interviewing as a research tool with a particular emphasis on its evolution within the field of marketing research where it has found commercial success and a legitimacy that has made it a staple of social science research. Yet this is only part of the story, as today's focus group methodologies also evolved from two additional primary sources: (1) clinical psychological uses of group analysis and therapy and (2) sociological and social psychological studies of group dynamics. The history of focus groups is also replete with the enriching effects of interdisciplinary collaboration in the early days, as well as the migration of researchers from one field (e.g., clinical psychology) to another (marketing research). Consequently, the theoretical underpinnings of focus group methodology emerged from what the pioneer Alfred Goldman described as a "rich stew of socio-psychological and psychotherapeutic traditions and techniques" (Goldman & McDonald, 1987, p. 3).

**Table 1.1** Milestones in Focus Group Research

1913	Strong, E. K., Jr., "Psychological Methods as Applied to Advertising," <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i> , 4, 393–395.
1925	Poffenberger, A. T., <i>Psychology in Advertising</i> . Chicago, IL: A.W. Shaw.
1926	Bogardus, E. S., "The Group Interview," <i>Journal of Applied Sociology</i> , 10, 372–382.
1931	Moreno, J. L., <i>The First Book on Group Psychotherapy</i> . New York, NY: Beacon House.
1934	Lazarsfeld, P. F., "The Psychological Aspects of Market Research," <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , 13(October), 54–71.
1937	Lazarsfeld, P. F., "The Use of Detailed Interviews in Market Research," <i>Journal of Marketing</i> , 2(July), 3–8.

(Continued)

**Table 1.1** (Continued)

---

1940–1945	“Focused Interviews” (both group and individual) conducted by Lazarsfeld’s associates Hadley Cantril, Gordon Allport, and Robert Merton, initially for CBS radio program research, later for military training and morale films.
1944	Edmiston, V., “The Group Interview,” <i>Journal of Educational Research</i> , 37, 593–601.
1946	Merton, R. K., & Kendall, P. L., “The Focussed Interview,” <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> , 51, 541–557.
1947	Dichter, E., “Psychology in Marketing Research,” <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , 25, 432–443.
1948	Lewin, K., <i>Resolving Social Conflicts</i> . New York, NY: Harper.
1949–1953	Trade press cites numerous uses of focus groups by advertising agencies in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago.
1954	Smith, G. H., <i>Motivation Research in Advertising and Marketing</i> . New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
1962	Goldman, A. E., “The Group Depth Interview,” <i>Journal of Marketing</i> , 26, 61–68.
1976	Bellenger, D., Bernhardt, K., & Goldstucker, J., <i>Qualitative Research in Marketing</i> . Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association.
1979	Higgenbotham, J. B., & Cox, K. (Eds.), <i>Focus Group Interviews: A Reader</i> . Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association.
1982	Fern, E. F., “The Use of Focus Groups for Idea Generation: The Effects of Group Size, Acquaintanceship, and Moderator on Response Quantity and Quality,” <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 19, 1–13.
1990s	Books on focus groups by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), Templeton (1994), Greenbaum (2000), Morgan (1998), Edmunds (1999), Krueger and Casey (2000), and Fern (2001).
Late 1990s	Criticism of marketing focus groups appears in the trade press (Kaufman, 1997).
2003	Ethnographic influences emerge in the use of focus groups conducted in natural settings with real social groups (Wellner, 2003).
2007	Growing use of focus group research in developing markets and in a global context (Hennink, 2007).
2012	Growing use of virtual groups, virtual worlds, and related technologies simultaneously expand the definition of “group” in time and space and extend the scope of modalities by which data may be obtained (Houliet & Gamble, 2012).

---

However, a stew is not necessarily a melting pot, and fundamental differences exist between sociological, social psychological, clinical psychological, health care, education, and marketing research concerns. Focus group pioneers were hardly single-minded, and marked differences of opinion and approach reflect distinctive intellectual priorities within each parent discipline. These divergent orientations toward research conducted within group settings contribute to often sharp disagreements about how focus groups should be used, designed, fielded, and interpreted. This has also produced, over time, hybrid forms of focus groups whose design reflects varying degrees of sociological and psychological influence, as well as the more pragmatic concerns associated with specific applications and settings. The following discussion examines the origins and uses of focus group research in its three parent disciplines.

Not surprisingly, sociology's core interest in social groups and group behavior led many researchers to employ group interviews in their research. Both Karl Mannheim (1936) and E. S. Bogardus (1926) report using group interviews in the 1920s. Since then, qualitative sociologists have used focus groups to study a myriad of group behavior topics, including social interaction patterns and personal space; group composition, cohesiveness, decision making, and productivity; and conformity, leadership, and social power. Sociologists and social psychologists share many common research interests, although the latter tend to focus on the individual rather than the group as the unit of analysis.

## **Contributions From Sociology and Social Psychology**

The most prominent early social psychological uses of focus groups sought to achieve understanding of the effects of media communications (e.g., radio broadcasts, government fund-raising appeals, and World War II military training films) and the underlying factors that explained the relative effectiveness and persuasiveness of a particular communication. The most famous and influential stimulus of the growth of focus groups sprang from network radio researchers' frustration with their inability to diagnose why different programs received different likability scores. Thus, the "focussed" group interview had its origins in the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University in 1941 when Paul Lazarsfeld invited Robert Merton to assist him in the evaluation of audience response to radio programs.<sup>1</sup> In this early research, members of a mass media studio audience listened to a recorded radio program and were asked to press a red button when they heard anything that evoked a negative response—anger, boredom, or disbelief—and to press a green button whenever they had a positive response. These responses and their timings were recorded on a polygraph-like instrument called the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer

(a recording device that is quite similar to devices still in use in media research today). At the end of the program, members of the audience were asked to focus on the positive and negative events they recorded and to discuss the reasons for these reactions (Merton, 1987).

After the outbreak of World War II, Merton applied his technique to the analysis of Army training and morale films for the Research Branch of the U.S. Army Information and Education Division, which was headed by Samuel Stouffer. This experience resulted in the publication of an article outlining the methodology (Merton & Kendall, 1946) and eventually a book on the technique (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Research findings based on use of the technique, both during the war and later at Columbia University, formed the basis of one of the classic books on persuasion and the influence of mass media (Merton, Fiske, & Curtis, 1946).

Merton later adapted the technique for use in individual interviews, and in time, the method, both in group and in individual interview settings, became rather widely disseminated and used. It also tended to change as researchers began to modify procedures for their own needs and to merge it with other types of group interviews that did not include the media focus procedure employed by Merton. Thus, what is known as a focus group today takes many different forms and may not follow all of the procedures Merton identified in his book on “focussed” interviews.

Ironically, focus groups soon fell out of favor in both academic social psychological and communications research as the fields adopted more experimental and quantitative approaches. However, the theoretical influence of phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1967) and a revival in the 1980s of sociological interest in qualitative research methods contributed to the reemergence of focus groups, which caused some observers to conclude incorrectly that they represented a “new tool” for qualitative sociological research (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). More recently, focus groups have experienced a revival in audience reception and media research (Jensen, 2011; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Also, focus groups have become an increasingly popular data collection method in the social and health sciences and in evaluation research (Ansay, Perkins, & Nelson, 2004; Hennink, 2007; Walden, 2008, 2009, 2012).

## **Contributions From Clinical Psychology**

Uses of focus groups in psychotherapeutic research emerged from the quite different priorities of clinical diagnosis and treatment. Some of the earliest clinical uses of groups date back to Moreno’s (1931) seminal work with psychodrama and play therapy. Compared with groups conducted in the social psychological tradition, the clinical approach is more likely to emphasize interactive group

discussions and activities; individuals' deeply seated thoughts and feelings; and extensive, wide-ranging, and spontaneous expressions. Researchers influenced by the psychotherapeutic school tend to favor focus groups that are more developmental in orientation and design. Such groups place less emphasis on evaluative tasks and tend to use more indirect ways of asking questions. Also, in contrast to individual patient–therapist psychotherapy, the interactions among participants in clinical group therapy facilitate individuals' treatment processes.

An enduring heritage of focus groups' clinical psychological origins lies in today's cadre of focus group moderators with professional backgrounds in traditional psychotherapy, particularly those forms with early-20th-century European origins (Kassarjian, 1994). The earliest and the most renowned pioneer, who migrated from clinical psychological to marketing research, was Paul Lazarsfeld's student Ernest Dichter. Although he tended to prefer individual over group interviews, his consulting company trained a large number of the first generation of focus group researchers. Alfred Goldman (1962) is prominent among the second generation of researchers who transitioned from clinical to marketing research uses of focus groups, and his article, "The Group Depth Interview," is widely considered a definitive classic. Many moderators today also have specific ties to newer psychotherapeutic techniques, such as encounter groups, transactional analysis, gestalt therapy, cognitive–behavioral therapies, as well as sensitivity training.

## **Contributions From Marketing Research**

The successful uses of focus groups in evaluating World War II morale and training films did not go unnoticed by the marketing research community. The procedures developed by Lazarsfeld and Merton were imported directly into CBS's research of pilot radio and television programs and are still used today. Although it is likely that some business studies used focus groups in the 1930s (Henderson, 2004), their popularity grew dramatically from the 1950s onward (Leonhard, 1967; Smith, 1954).

Marketing researchers quickly discovered the versatility of focus groups in addressing numerous concerns related to designing products and services: obtaining consumers' perceptions of prices, brands, and retail environments; their reactions to advertising and other marketing stimuli; and their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with various products and services. Also, there is some speculation that, in the days before the rise of commercial interviewing facilities, interviewers grew weary of lugging around heavy reel-to-reel tape recorders for capturing their in-home conversations with consumers and responded positively to the idea of sitting down to interview a group of housewives in

someone's family room. In comparison with statistical research, focus groups are more user-friendly, and they can often be fielded and analyzed relatively quickly. They also provide an office getaway that is often social and entertaining, as well as insightful.

Perhaps the most compelling quality of focus groups is their delivery of "live" consumers for observation by marketing managers. As Axelrod exclaimed in 1975, focus groups provide managers "a chance to experience a flesh and blood consumer" (p. 6). In many ways, market research uses of focus groups reflect both social and clinical psychological traditions to varying degrees. Their initial emergence in the marketing literature is strongly linked to the "motivation" researchers of the 1950s (Smith, 1954), who typically had intellectual grounding in Freudian and neo-Freudian thought. Groups conducted in this tradition tend to share the exploratory, interactive, playful, and confrontational qualities of clinical psychological groups. In contrast, focus groups rooted in social psychological thinking tend to be more evaluative in purpose, direct in questioning, and lower in respondent interaction. Such focus groups are often heavily involved in gathering consumers' reactions to product concepts, marketing communications, and competitive brands.

The intellectual distinctions between the two schools are largely below the surface and tend to emerge in vague notions about what "scientific" research is and what falls short. Actually, many researchers today are unaware of these historically competitive ideologies, having learned focus group practice through the oral traditions and research manuals of advertising agencies, research companies, client organizations, and university courses. The resulting focus group hybrids reflect varying degrees of psychotherapeutic and social psychological influence, however unconsciously. Overall, this is probably a positive development. Focus groups that rely too heavily on individuals' evaluations and voting tend toward superficial faux surveys, and ones that rely entirely on unstructured and indirect questioning may not yield sufficiently definitive findings.

#### SEPARATION OF PRACTICE FROM THEORY

Despite these differing orientations toward focus groups, it is important to recognize that the fields that have contributed most to focus group theory and practice actually share several common and basic theoretical positions about the technique's purpose, nature, and structure. Unfortunately, the core theory governing focus group research, which connects both the social and clinical schools of thought, is largely ignored and often violated by today's growing army of focus group users, practitioners, and facilitators. Sometimes the consequences of this are minimal, and a focus group muddles along, yielding sufficient answers to key questions. However, most research seems governed by the garbage-in/garbage-out rule. A focus group that is designed



and fielded completely at odds with the method's core logic is likely to generate questionable results. The premise of this chapter is that greater awareness of focus group theory per se will encourage researchers to design studies in ways that improve the likelihood of discovering things that are more interesting, useful, and valid.

## Focus Group Theory

The preceding discussion begs the question: Are there core elements of focus group theory and practice that are common across the various disciplines that use focus group research? The answer appears to be yes, although the presence of any particular element will vary according to the research context. The following discussion proposes four normative criteria that constitute a prototypic focus group. This analysis draws heavily on both the seminal work of the sociologist Robert Merton and the thinking of the market research pioneer Alfred Goldman, whose ideas both integrate the social and clinical psychological traditions and bridge academic and practitioner perspectives. Stripped down to its basics, the theoretical pillars of focus group research are reflected in the (paraphrased) title of Goldman's (1962) classic article, "The [Focused] Group Depth Interview."

### FOCUSED RESEARCH

In a fascinating intellectual retrospective more than 40 years after his groundbreaking group studies of radio broadcasts and army morale films, Robert Merton (1987) reflected on the historical continuities and discontinuities of focus group research. He explained that the basic purpose of the "focussed" interview was to gather qualitative data from individuals who have experienced some "particular concrete situation," which serves as the focus of the interview (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 541). Interestingly, Merton explains his view of the "focussed" interview as a general qualitative research approach that can be used in both individual and group interviews. The objective of studying and learning about a "particular concrete situation" implies that an interview, whether individual or group, will be relatively singular in focus. This element contrasts with the typical uses of survey research to gather statistical measures of numerous topics and variables, and this is why focus groups are commonly prescribed for research that is either exploratory, clinical, and/or phenomenological (Aaker, Kumar, Leone, & Day, 2012; Calder, 1977).

Numerous published reports of focus group research in the behavioral sciences suggest that most conform to the criteria of focus. In the health sciences, for example, focus groups have been used to explore the role and concept of the

nurse practitioner, social service concerns of women infected with HIV, and doctor–caregiver relationships. Sociological and social psychological studies have used focus groups to explore the lifestyles of working-class Latina women, the psychosocial aspects of widowhood, and various specific aspects of interpersonal group dynamics and influences. Much clinical psychological group research maintains focus due to the common practice of including individuals whose “particular concrete situation” revolves around the same psychological condition. In marketing research, focus groups are used extensively to explore consumers’ lifestyles and trends, their involvements in product categories and with competitive brands, and their consumption histories, aspirations, and concerns. Although many studies are relatively singular in focus, others are dispersed across a potpourri of loosely or unrelated topics, questions, and tasks (Rook, 2003). Such out-of-focus groups arise from managers’ pragmatic concerns about research time and money, as well as their generally diminished interest in theoretical and methodological subtleties. Although focus groups that have multiple foci may yield information that assists in decision making, they are unlikely to generate the social atmospherics that are conducive to the traditional normative criteria of conversational interviewing, in-depth data elicitation, and within-group interaction, nor are they likely to produce rich insights about a well-defined topic.

## GROUP INTERACTIONS

A second signature characteristic of a focus group is the objective of understanding the group dynamics that affect individuals’ perceptions, information processing, and decision making. The compelling logic for conducting research in a group rather than an individual setting is to allow observations of how and why individuals accept or reject others’ ideas. Also, stimulating interactions among group participants are hypothesized to generate more information than individual interviews would provide, although there is little support for this position (Fern, 1982). Three key elements of the design of focus group research directly affect the nature and quality of the interactions among focus group participants: (1) group composition, (2) interpersonal influences, and (3) research environment factors. Numerous behavioral science studies have investigated these group behavior influences, and they are summarized in Chapter 2, so the discussion here is limited to a few issues.

Merton (1987) concludes correctly that many focus groups are “not . . . groups in the sociological sense of having a common identity or a continuing unity, shared norms, and goals” (p. 555). He recommends that these “nongroups” should more appropriately be called *groupings*. On the other hand, focus group research in sociology, clinical psychology, and the health sciences is likely to gather groups comprising individuals who do share some

common identity and goals, as well as some common “concrete situation.” In comparison, focus groups in marketing are often more likely to be populated with “groupings” of individuals who share a few common demographics and product usage patterns.

In the real world, information and influences filter through individuals’ everyday interactions with family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and other social networks, yet researchers rarely tap these natural, existing, and accessible groups. Instead, they tend to rely on the convenience of professional recruiters’ extensive lists of willing focus group participants. A countertrend has emerged, perhaps reflecting the growing influence of ethnography in a variety of disciplines—focus groups conducted with real groups or “friend groups,” often in natural settings (their homes) (Wong, 2010). Participants in such groups tend to talk more, and there are opportunities to do things that would be difficult in the typical sterile focus group facility. For example, one advertising agency invited a group of neighbors to collect in a local backyard with their lawnmower in tow for a discussion of lawn care.

A major issue in group dynamics research is the influence of group members’ demographics, personality, and physical characteristics. Although the findings are not conclusive, they seem to suggest that groups that are relatively homogeneous are more productive and “work better.” One problem with this notion is the fact that many of these studies were conducted 40 or more years ago, when including Hispanics among a group of white respondents, for example, might have made both types of participants feel uncomfortable. Arguably, Americans are more comfortable with diversity today, so earlier conclusions may be time bound. Finally, there is a widespread, but rarely articulated, assumption that focus groups should be pleasant experiences and conflict should be avoided. This is certainly not the situation in clinical groups, with their varying emphases on confrontational encounters among group members and techniques designed to surface deep-seated emotions. Focus groups in marketing typically avoid conflict that might arise from differences in participants’ age, social status, and even gender. Researchers prefer groups that are homogeneous with respect to these criteria, yet many marketing problems span these respondent characteristics. For example, a brand that is perceived as “too feminine” (e.g., Zima) might learn a lot by fielding groups comprising both men and women. Similarly, a brand that is perceived as “too old” (e.g., Cadillac) might obtain useful information by conducting focus groups with baby boomers and both their parents and children. On the other hand, well-managed conflict within a focus group may be very useful when doing policy or political research where the points of disagreement and dynamics of conflict may be of interest.

## IN-DEPTH DATA

A strong thread that connects the diverse family of today's focus group users and providers is a belief that live encounters with groups of people will yield incremental answers to behavioral questions that go beyond the level of surface explanation. Clinical psychology is rich with qualitative research tools and techniques, such as projective methods and group involvement techniques, that elicit the emotions, associations, and motivations that influence particular behaviors. Focus groups in the health sciences often address emotional, even life-and-death issues. Market researchers have similar, although generally less serious concerns about identifying the underlying behavioral factors that account for consumers' attitudes, preferences, and motivations. In the 1950s, this similarity of objectives stimulated marketing researchers to adapt projective and other qualitative methods for their purposes. So many "deep" insights were published that historians have described this period as marketing's "motivation research" era (Smith, 1954).

In their early days in marketing research, the prototypical focus group was characterized by a relatively small number of loosely structured questions that revolved around a focal topic or stimulus and encouraged extensive discussion and probing. Carl Rogers's work on nondirective interviewing was particularly influential, and many prominent focus group moderators had graduate degrees in clinical psychology or in related fields (e.g., Ernest Dichter, Ted Nowak, Perham Nahl, George Horsley Smith, Steuart Henderson Britt, Thomas Coffin, Alfred Goldman, and Irving White). Over time, focus groups have drifted away from their original emphasis on achieving in-depth consumer insights. Robert Merton's (1987) own impression of focus groups in marketing concludes that they are "being mercilessly misused" (p. 557). Two factors have contributed to the decline of depth in much focus group research.

First, focus group discussion guides often tend to include too many questions, which often make the experience more like a within-group survey than an interactive discussion. The veteran focus group analyst Naomi Henderson (2004) estimates that in comparison with the early focus groups, today's groups cover nearly twice the material in the same time. Rook (2003) quantifies the interaction between the number of questions in the discussion guide and the focus group length. It is common today to have 30 or more questions, which can reduce the response time per respondent to 13 seconds or less. In these circumstances, the moderator is likely to feel hurried and is unable to probe interesting or unclear responses, all of which militate against achieving in-depth information and deep understanding.

A second problem emerges from the tendency to use exclusively direct questions and verbal responses to them. This not only is inconsistent with the historical nature of focus groups, but it also defies current scientific understandings about the workings of the human mind. Recent research in neuroscience concludes that the vast majority of human thought is visual, metaphorical, and emotional and resides deeply in neurological substrata

(Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2010; Zaltman, 2003). Access to these mental zones typically requires more subtle, indirect approaches to asking questions; and it suggests using nonverbal techniques that involve visualizations or role-playing.

## HUMANISTIC INTERVIEW

The history of focus group theory and practice is part of the larger history of qualitative research in the behavioral sciences. In comparison with most quantitative research, qualitative research is a contact sport, requiring some degree of immersion into individuals' lives. This and its emphasis on meaning rather than measurement have contributed to its characterization as "humanistic" research (Anderson & Braud, 2011). This is not meant to ennoble qualitative research; rather, it simply points to a general orientation that includes empathy, openness, active listening, and various types of interactions with research participants. Clinical psychological groups exhibit these qualities; and arguably, focus group research in the health sciences *is* noble in its providing a voice to marginalized groups, such as AIDS patients.

Focus groups in some disciplines, for example, marketing and politics, among others, tend to perform less well on the humanistic criterion. This is partly due to the tendency to use research more for evaluative than developmental purposes (Zaltman, 1989). Marketers have a voracious appetite for obtaining consumers' evaluations of new product concepts, advertising copy, and competitive brands. This is understandable and necessary, but such interests might be better served through survey research rather than focus groups. Also, groups that are dedicated to evaluative polling tend to exhibit characteristics of a "business meeting" (Agar & MacDonald, 1995) in which moderators misguidedly seek to achieve group consensus. Another factor that is likely to diminish a group's humanistic qualities is the erroneous but widespread belief that the moderator should ask every question that appears in the discussion guide, which often "destroys the elements of freedom and variability within the interview" (McCracken, 1988, p. 25).

The criticism of focus group research in a variety of disciplines has been growing for some time, and some companies have abandoned them almost entirely in favor of research alternatives such as ethnography, which facilitate greater immersion into consumers' lives (Kiley, 2005). The controversy peaked when Malcolm Gladwell in his best seller *Blink* (2005) characterized focus groups as generally useless. He reiterated and elaborated his view as a keynote speaker at the American Association of Advertising Agencies' summer conference and caused quite a stir because advertising agencies are extremely heavy users of focus groups (Pollack, 2005). The ebb and flow of focus group research across and within various disciplinary fields—and the attendant intellectual elements of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—make focus groups an interesting and dynamic arena that continues to merit consideration and use.

## Purpose of the Book

Despite its widespread use, the focus group has been the object of rather little systematic research, particularly in recent years. A number of how-to books have appeared over the past two decades (Carey & Asbury, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2008; Liamputtong, 2011), but they tend to deal with the practical aspects of recruiting and running focus groups. None reflect recent advances in the use of computer-assisted content analysis techniques that may be helpful for analyzing focus group-generated data, and few seek to integrate the focus group technique with the rich literature on group dynamics from which the method sprang. Although all of these sources are useful, they are often incomplete, particularly for the student or scholar seeking a theoretical foundation for the approach.

The objective of this book is to provide a systematic treatment of the design, conduct, and interpretation of focus group interviews within the context of social science research and theory and the substantial literature on group processes and the analysis of qualitative data. Much is known about the interaction of small groups and about the analysis of qualitative data. It is on this knowledge that the validity of the focus group interview as a scientific tool rests.

## Plan for the Book

The remaining chapters of this book deal with specific aspects of the design, use, and interpretation of focus groups. One of the important advantages of focus groups as a research tool is the fact that a substantial body of research and theory exists with respect to behavior in groups. The field of social psychology, and particularly the subfield of group dynamics, provides a strong foundation on which to build valid and useful focus group research. Chapter 2 synthesizes this literature and provides an overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations of focus group research. It considers topics such as power, leadership, interpersonal communication, social facilitation and inhibition, and the influence of group composition. The literature related to each of these issues is briefly reviewed, and the implications for designing and conducting focus group research are discussed. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the basic elements and issues involved in focus group research, including the various applications of focus groups, their relative advantages and disadvantages, and the main steps in the design and use of focus groups.

Next, we turn to the more detailed mechanics of designing, conducting, and interpreting focus groups. Chapter 4 considers the problem of recruiting participants for focus group sessions and designing the interview guide. Issues related to the determination of the sampling frame, the use of incentives, scheduling, and physical facilities are considered in this chapter. Chapter 4 also addresses the problems associated with the recruitment of special groups of individuals, such as business executives, working parents, physicians, and children.

The key to obtaining rich and valid insights through the use of focus groups is an effective moderator. Chapter 5 deals with the characteristics of effective focus group moderators. This chapter summarizes the rich literature on interviewing skills and techniques and leadership styles, and it relates the relevant findings to the focus group setting. In addition to characteristics specific to the interviewer, Chapter 5 considers the potential for interaction between various interviewer characteristics and the dynamics of the group. The implications of such interactions for the quality of data obtained from focus groups are also discussed.

Techniques and approaches for conducting a focus group are treated in Chapter 6. Methods for drawing out respondents, for probing for additional information and clarification of responses, for dealing with domineering or reticent respondents, and for facilitating discussion are reviewed. In addition, the chapter deals with topics such as how to deal with sensitive or potentially embarrassing issues; how to present stimulus materials; and how to deal with specialized populations, such as children; and how to manage the special issues associated with conducting groups in an international venue. The use of audio and video recording equipment is considered in the chapter, as well as the collection of observational data to supplement verbal responses.

Focus groups generate verbal and observational data. The data must generally be coded and analyzed by means of content analysis. Chapter 7 provides an overview of the content analysis literature and its application to focus group data. The chapter also offers a discussion of various computer-assisted approaches to content analysis and the implications of recent research in cognitive psychology on associative networks for the analysis and interpretation of focus group data. In addition to considering the issues of content coding and analysis, the chapter discusses the interpretation of such coding and analysis.

Chapter 8 is designed to tie together all of the preceding chapters through more detailed examples of the uses of focus groups. These examples include a discussion of the problem that precipitated the research, the reasons a focus group is appropriate, the development of the interview guide, and the conclusions drawn from the focus group and the actions that followed from these conclusions. Chapter 9 considers the issues associated with conducting virtual focus via telephone and the Internet and describes other group research techniques, such as synectics, brainstorming, and the Delphi technique. Finally, in Chapter 10, we offer a brief summary of the role focus groups play in the broader array of research tools within the social sciences.

## Conclusion

In examining the historical origins of focus group research in the behavioral sciences, one is struck by the high level of interdisciplinary collaboration and creativity. The now famous studies of World War II training and morale films

were led by individuals with backgrounds in social psychology, experimental psychology, and sociology. Similarly, market research uses of focus groups were strongly influenced by the intellectual border crossings of clinical and social psychologists into the marketing field. In looking at focus group practice across various disciplines, one can also observe how group research formats and approaches vary according to the core issues that characterize a particular field. Finally, it is interesting to consider the degree to which focus groups conform to the historical normative criteria discussed in this chapter. In some cases, the lack of conformity merely reflects the necessities of adaptive use in a particular field or for a specific research purpose. In the worst cases, a drift away from historical focus group theory and research design norms results in focus groups that have little singular focus, elicit superficial consensual data, rarely achieve in-depth understandings, and end up as group surveys rather than qualitative interviews.

## Review Questions

1. What are the origins of focus group research? Why is the group interview an appealing method of data collection?
2. Why did much of the early development of focus group research reside in the study of communications? Is there something about the group interview that makes focus groups especially useful in such a context?
3. What disciplines have contributed to the development of modern focus group practice? What have been the unique perspectives and contributions of these fields to focus group practice?
4. Why has the popularity of focus group research waxed and waned over time?
5. What are some of the problems associated with the conduct of group depth interviews?

**Exercise:** Do a search of the Internet using *focus group* as the search term. Note the types of applications of focus group research you find. Compare and contrast these applications in terms of the research questions, sample, and approach. What does this comparison suggest about focus group research?

## Note

1. See Merton (1987) for an interesting recollection of these beginnings, as well as how “focussed” interviewing lost its second s.