

# 1

## Introducing Focus Groups

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### Basic Issues

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#### Four Brief Examples

*Who Has Heart Attacks and Why?*

A group of people in their fifties are describing people they've known who have had heart attacks. As they talk, they produce a long list of all the things that might make a difference, but one thing they all emphasize is the importance of stress. For example, one person talks about how cigarette smoking can cause heart attacks, but another person points out how stressful it can be to quit smoking. The first speaker agrees, noting that the stress of quitting might be worse than the effects of the cigarettes.

### *Adjusting to Recent Widowhood*

A group of older women are talking about the experience of losing their husbands within the past two years. One woman is unhappy because her children want her to stop grieving after six months, but she feels that it really takes much longer. The amount of time it takes to recover becomes a major topic in their discussion, and another woman produces murmurs of agreement from the group members when she says that the second year is sometimes harder than the first.

### *Seeking a Diagnosis for a Family Member With Dementia*

A group of family caregivers are talking about their encounters with health care professionals as they tried to find out more about whether the people they were caring for truly had serious problems with cognitive impairment. On the one hand, they express considerable frustration about working with primary care physicians who seemed to have little knowledge about dementia. On the other hand, there is broad agreement that things got better once they finally saw a specialist.

### *Becoming a Graduate Student*

A group of students who have just finished their first year in graduate school are comparing their experiences across their different programs. Despite the variety of things they are studying, one thing they find that they all have in common is the intensity of their workload. The conversation quickly centers on issues involving time management, competing priorities, and the balance between the demands of school and life outside of school.

Each of these examples describes a piece of research using focus groups. Although focus groups are now a well-known method, it was not so long ago that focus groups were almost unknown in social research. As Figure 1.1 shows, researchers have published more than 25,000 articles using focus groups over the past two decades, and the popularity of focus groups has continued to grow.

What are focus groups, and why are they so widely used? These key questions will be addressed in the first part of this chapter, followed by brief descriptions of the four research projects that will serve as examples throughout this book. Finally, the “Advanced Topics” section of the chapter will provide a history of focus groups.

## **Defining Focus Groups**

Focus groups are a research method that collects qualitative data through group discussions. This definition contains two components: first, the goal of generating data, and second, the reliance on interaction.

The assumption that generating data is the purpose of conducting focus groups is undoubtedly second nature to qualitative researchers, but it is not necessarily obvious to those who fall outside this camp. People make use of group discussions for all kinds of purposes, and all kinds of things get called focus groups that have little to do

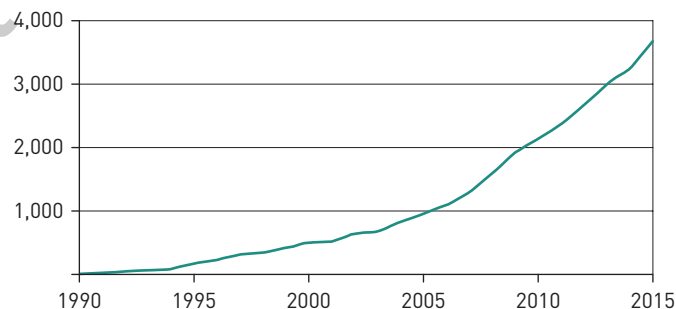
with collecting data for research purposes. In particular, decision-making groups or meetings with a relatively informal format sometimes get labeled focus groups. Focus groups are not committees or open forums. They are a research method, and as such, they are an integral part of an effort to collect data to address a question or topic that is of interest to the researcher.

With regard to relying on interaction, *what makes focus groups unique as a research method is the use of the participants' discussions to produce data that would be less accessible without that interaction.* Other research methods used to collect data are sometimes labeled focus groups even when there is only minimal interaction among the **participants**. The most common example in this category would be “serial interviews,” during which several people are present, but the researcher questions each of them one at a time. Any process that avoids an active exchange among the participants is missing the key advantage that focus groups have to offer.

One special case related to focus groups involves naturally occurring groups. Although there are those who consider naturally occurring discussions to be focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013), if the goal is to understand the life of the group itself, then the goal will require prolonged contact, rather than an hour or two of discussion among the group's members. In this case, it would be more useful to think of working with naturally occurring groups as a form of participant observation (Bernard, 2011; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010). While naturally occurring groups certainly can be a good source of participants for focus groups (e.g., Kitzinger, 1994), the process of capturing data from ongoing groups is generally too unfocused to count as a focus group. Instead, it is best to think of focus groups as a form of interview in which the goal is to collect a concentrated set of data on a topic of interest to the researcher.

A final issue regarding the definition of focus groups is whether they are different from **group interviews**. Although some early authors (e.g., Frey & Fontana, 1991)

**FIGURE 1.1** • Growth in the Number of Academic Articles per Year About Focus Groups\*



\* Web of Science

made a distinction between focus groups and group interviews, the broad tendency since then has been to treat the two labels as synonyms. As a result, “focus groups” is an umbrella term encompassing many alternative formats.

One constant factor in focus groups is the inevitable balancing act between the researcher’s goals and the participants’ interests. Although it is the researcher who selects the topic and guides the conversation, it is the group members who generate the data through their discussion of the topic. Put another way, *it is your focus, but it is their group*.

### *A Brief History of Focus Groups*

The history of focus groups is covered in considerable detail in the “Advanced Topics” section at the end of this chapter, but it is still useful to provide an introductory overview of their origin and development. This history can be divided into three periods, beginning with their creation in academic research in 1941. Although it is possible to find experimentation with group interviews prior to this date, it marks the self-conscious creation of focus groups in the basic form in which they are still used today. The creators of the method were Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, who were two of the best-known figures of midcentury American sociology.

Despite these auspicious beginnings, focus groups did not become a popular method within the social sciences until much later. Instead, the second period in their history occurred primarily within marketing research. During this period, focus groups became widely used in the development of products and in efforts to understand consumers’ motivations, especially with regard to purchase decisions.

The most recent period in the history of focus groups is defined by their rediscovery in the social sciences. As Figure 1.1 shows, there were hardly any articles about focus groups in the years prior to 1990. Since then the number of articles being published has accelerated rapidly to several thousand per year. This greatly renewed interest in focus groups is the basis for the present book, both in terms of their basic form over more than 75 years and the more advanced applications that are available today.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Groups*

The strengths of focus groups come from the insights that arise during the interaction among the participants. These discussions can clarify not just what participants think but why they think the way they do. As they share and compare their experiences and outlooks, the participants are naturally interested in the ways that they are either similar to or different from each other. This dynamic is especially valuable for the researcher because it not only shows the extent of consensus and diversity within the group but also provides information about the sources of those similarities and differences. (Chapter 3 contains a more detailed consideration of issues related to interaction in focus groups.)

The best way to consider the weaknesses of focus groups is in comparison to other qualitative methods. Starting with participant observation, focus groups lack the naturalness of going into the field to encounter people interacting in their own settings. By comparison, the discussions in focus groups occur in a researcher-centered

environment where the sheer fact that the conversation is happening at all is due to the researcher's initiative. As such, the interaction in focus groups should be considered "naturalistic" rather than truly natural. The fact that the researcher generates the basis for the discussion also provides an advantage, however. In participant observation, one is always limited by what there is to observe, and many settings do not provide opportunities to hear concentrated discussions on exactly the topics that the researcher has in mind. As an example, consider the first of the case studies to be presented below, in which the topic is people's perceptions of "who has heart attacks and why." Although people certainly do discuss this topic from time to time, it would be hard to imagine a setting for participant observation that would provide routine access to interaction on this topic.

Individual interviewing is the other major qualitative method that sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups. Focus groups lack the depth of individual interviews, during which it is possible to hear one person speak about the research topic for an hour or more. Given the time constraints that apply to any kind of interviewing, focus groups inevitably generate less detailed information about each person than an individual interview. However, one advantage of focus groups is that they show participants' thoughts and feelings in a social context. For example, one-to-one interviews cannot generate expressions such as, "I never thought of it that way, but now that you mention it," or, "I hear what you're saying, but I guess I'm a little different because . . ." (Chapter 2 provides more comparisons between individual interviews and focus groups.)

One key way that focus groups differ from both participant observation and individual interviewing is the need to assemble workable groups of participants. With participant observation, interactions and discussions happen in the research setting. By comparison, the need to locate and recruit participants for focus groups can pose a serious logistical limitation. Beyond merely assembling a group, it has to be possible to generate a comfortable and productive set of interactions among the participants. With individual interviews, there is no issue of compatibility since the participants speak for themselves with only the interviewer present. The ability to provide effective interaction on the research topic is thus an essential requirement for focus groups.

At their best, focus groups enable the researcher to gather data by simply listening to and learning from the participants. When there is an active discussion of the research topics, this produces a stream of data. There is nothing magical about this process. Instead, it requires both a careful selection of research goals and good choices about the research designs that implement those goals. These are the principal subjects for this book.

### *Case Study Examples From My Own Experience*

**Who Has Heart Attacks and Why?** The goal of this study was to hear how people who had limited experiences with heart attacks thought about what caused and prevented heart attacks. In particular, the idea was that those who had no direct contact with this phenomenon might develop their thinking through contact with others' thoughts and experiences, in a process of "informal socialization." The participants

for these groups were men and women aged 35 to 50 who had not had a heart attack themselves but who knew someone who had. (For more information, see Morgan & Spanish, 1984, 1985.)

One notable feature of these groups was the emphasis that we put on storytelling. Thus, each participant began by telling a story about someone they knew who had a heart attack. This was followed by a request to compare their stories and to add as many new stories as they could. The purpose of this format was to avoid people giving lists of risk factors (e.g., smoking, poor diet, lack of exercise, etc.) as a summary of their knowledge. Instead, this approach encouraged people to embed that information in stories. The sharing and comparing of these stories helped each person understand how their own ideas did or did not fit with what the other participants were saying.

The goal of this study was to learn how women who had recently lost a spouse coped with this experience. More specifically, the point was to find out about the influences of other people on their lives in order to contribute to the literature about the influence of social networks on the outcomes of stressful life events. The participants for these groups were women aged 60 to 80 whose husbands had died more than three months but less than two years ago. (For more information, see Morgan, 1989.)

These groups were unusual because there was only one question to guide the entire discussion: “Since you lost your husband, what sorts of things have made it easier or harder for you?” In keeping with the very open nature of the topic, the **moderator** played only a minimal role in leading the discussion. Because of the intensity of their experiences, the participants had little difficulty managing their own groups. This design made it possible to hear about the participants’ experiences in their own terms, and even though there was a clear underlying research question, the point was to learn about how this topic fit into the lives of these women without directing them to discuss the things that interested the research team.

**Seeking a Diagnosis for a Family Member With Dementia.** The goal of this study was to learn how family caregivers for people with memory impairment made the decision to seek a diagnosis for that problem. These decisions were a particularly problematic research topic because there is no cure for age-related dementia, meaning that nothing compelled these caregivers to come to the clinic that provided the basis for recruiting participants. The **recruitment** of the participants was based on family members who were listed in the clinic’s records as the contact person for a patient diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease or a similar memory problem. (For more information, see Morgan, 2002.)

This study featured a comparative design that separated participants into different groups according to how severe their family members’ symptoms were at the time of diagnosis. In some cases, the family sought diagnosis when the potential patient first exhibited difficulties; in other cases, the family did not arrive at the clinic until the signs of illness were notably more advanced. Dividing the group membership in this way matched each participant with others who made their decisions in similar

circumstances. For the research team, this division created an opportunity to compare how and when people made their decisions.

**Becoming a Graduate Student.** The goal of this study was to generate both training materials and data for methodological research on focus groups. In particular, this study is the source for both the interview guide in Appendix 2 and the transcript in Appendix 3. The participants in each focus group were first-year graduate students from different departments. The group diversity was intended to give the participants the opportunity to explore the ways in which their experiences were either similar or different across departments.

One of the methodological papers from this research compared the two-person conversations in **dyadic interviews** (Morgan, 2015) with the group discussions in focus groups. In dyadic interviews, the participants speak directly to each other, while focus group participants need to spread their attention, so there are good reasons to expect meaningful differences in these forms of interaction. Rather than speculate about these differences, this research project systematically coded the interaction in the two types of interviews, with equivalent types of participants talking about the same topic.

## Advanced Topics

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### The History of Focus Groups

It is possible to trace the origin of focus groups to one specific meeting between Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton on November 23, 1946 (Merton, 1987; Rogers, 2004). Of course, other researchers had experimented with group interviews as a method for collecting data (e.g., Bogardus, 1926), and what we would recognize as focus groups appear to have been reinvented several times (e.g., Edmiston, 1944; Thompson & Demerath, 1952). Further, there was a general interest in groups throughout the social sciences during this period (e.g., Bales, 1950; Lewin, 1951; Rogers, 1945). Nevertheless, it was the work of Lazarsfeld and Merton that has had the most direct and lasting influence.

Within American sociology, Paul Lazarsfeld is primarily identified with quantitative research on academic topics, but he was also involved in qualitative research on marketing before his immigration to the United States in 1933 and for at least two decades after that. One of his best-known works while he was still in Austria involved extensive qualitative interviews (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933/1974), and one of his first publications in the United States (Lazarsfeld, 1934) was devoted to marketing.

It was Lazarsfeld who initiated the meeting with Merton so that his colleague could observe the work that Lazarsfeld's research bureau was doing on listeners' responses to radio programs. In particular, Lazarsfeld had developed a procedure in which a panel of 10 people would listen to a prerecorded radio program and note the points in the program that they rated favorably and unfavorably by pressing either a red or a green button. A device known as the "program analyzer" (Levy, 1982) captured these

responses to produce a record of the parts of the program that produced the most positive and negative ratings. Once the rating procedure was completed, an interviewer used the results from the program analyzer to go over the program with the raters to learn more about the sources of their responses.

Merton contributed the perspective of a qualitative researcher to this project. Once again, this skill is quite distant from what Merton is best known for as one of the premier theoretical sociologists of his day. In this case, his qualitative skills came from work that he did as a graduate student to interview “just about all the hoboes and homeless men and women that could be located in the Boston area” (Merton, 1987, p. 553). It also appears that he was familiar with the broader qualitative literature on this topic, based on his citation elsewhere (Merton, 1938) of the work of Nils Anderson (1923).

Merton’s qualitative skills came into play in his critique of the techniques that Lazarsfeld’s interviewer was using. In particular, Merton felt that the interviewer was not paying enough attention to the ways that participants had reacted to the radio show, that he was “inadvertently guiding” the participants’ responses, and that he was not “eliciting spontaneous expressions” from the participants (Merton, 1987, p. 553). In other words, there should have been more effort to hear the participants’ own thoughts and feelings. Lazarsfeld was fascinated by Merton’s comments and immediately talked him into conducting the next interview and demonstrating his alternate approach. (All of the descriptions of this first focus group come from Merton, including his own 1987 account and interviews that were reported by Hunt in 1961 and Rogers in 2004.)

Within a month of that first meeting of Lazarsfeld and Merton, the United States had entered the Second World War. The two continued their collaboration throughout the war, working on a variety of propaganda and training materials. Much of this research used what Merton preferred to call “focussed interviews,” both with individuals and in groups. This ultimately led to the publication of an article on the method (Merton & Kendall, 1946), which only briefly mentioned that their “nondirective” approach to interviewing could be applied to groups. The emphasis on group interviews was more prominent in a manual that circulated in mimeograph until its publication as *The Focused Interview* in 1956 (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956/1990). In that case, a full chapter on group interviews followed a general explanation of the method in the earlier chapters.

The Merton et al. (1956) book marked a high point in the early development of focus groups, followed by a decline in interest among academic research during the next 25 years. In a review of all the citations of that book through 1977, Lee (2010) was able to locate only two papers that actually used group interviews. There are several possible explanations for this lack of interest. First and foremost, neither Lazarsfeld nor Merton and his collaborators made any use of group interviews in their subsequent work. As noted earlier, Lazarsfeld concentrated on quantitative methods in the postwar period, and Merton’s sole project that featured qualitative research, *The Student Physician*, used only individual interviews (Merton, Reader, & Kendall, 1957). Second, by the time the full specification of the manual appeared, it was—as more than one reviewer noted—rather dated, due to its reliance on wartime examples that



were by then more than 10 years old. Finally, the 1950s marked a shift toward dominance by quantitative methods, especially in sociology (Converse, 2009).

Following the reintroduction of focus groups into the social sciences during the 1980s (to be discussed below), the Merton et al. book was reissued in 1990 in an edition that also included Merton's (1987). Ironically, this second edition has received nearly five times as many citations as the first edition ever did. This additional attention is even more ironic in light of Merton's rather disparaging assessment of focus groups in his 1987 article, which was reprinted in the 1990 edition of the book. As a final irony, despite Merton's renown during his career as a leading theorist and early expert in the sociology of science, the focus group may be his most lasting legacy. Indeed, Merton's 2003 obituary in the *New York Times* headlined him as both a "versatile sociologist" and "father of the focus group."

### *The Migration to Marketing Research*

Focus groups did not disappear in the postwar years; instead, they found a new home in marketing research. Interestingly, this transition also started with the work that Lazarsfeld and Merton did, in the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University. As noted earlier, Lazarsfeld had a longstanding interest in marketing, so it is not surprising that he hired people in that area and that members of his circle also

## BOX 1.1

### OBLITERATION BY INCORPORATION?

As a sociologist of science, Merton was particularly interested in credit that researchers received for being the first to make a discovery. As part of this work, he developed the concept of "obliteration by incorporation" (Merton, 1949), whereby early discoveries became so well known within a field that no one needed to refer to them explicitly. In essence, those early discoveries become so thoroughly incorporated into background knowledge that the contributions of their original discoverers are obliterated. In his 1987 article, Merton speculated that something like this might have occurred with his own work on focus groups, since some of the first reintroduction of the method into social sciences made no mention of his original role in developing it.

This was certainly true of my first publication in this topic area, in which my coauthor Margaret Spanish and I relied solely on citations of market research, because that was the primary source on focus groups at the time (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). I would argue, however, that a rather different process was at work. If Spanish and I had been able to rely on such famous forerunners as Lazarsfeld and Merton, it would have been easier to make our case for paying attention to what was then an unknown method in the social sciences. From this perspective, obliteration of the discoveries of Merton and his colleagues occurred because they were ignored, rather than incorporated.

went on to work in that area. Two important researchers who followed this path were Ernest Dichter and Herta Herzog.

Dichter was originally from Vienna, where he studied psychoanalysis with several leading authorities and worked with Lazarsfeld, who served as one of his sponsors for a visa when Dichter immigrated to the United States in 1938 (for biographical information on Dichter, see Dichter, 1960, and Horowitz, 1986). With Lazarsfeld's assistance, Dichter sought work in marketing and advertising as soon as he arrived. His specialty was what he called "motivational research," which emphasized an understanding of *why* consumers purchased products by using psychological principles to understand the factors underlying purchasing decisions. Dichter was hardly the only one to pursue motivational research during this period, but he had a talent for self-promotion, which made him the most public figure in this field (Packard, 1957).

Like Lazarsfeld and Merton, Dichter employed both individual and group "depth interviews." In doing so, he did not ask directly about motivations (i.e., self-reports of why people did what they did), because he wanted to avoid simplistic or preconceived answers (Bartos, 1984; Dichter, 1947). Instead, he concentrated on asking about product use and purchase experience to the extent that the interviewees he hired did not even know the purpose of the research. Dichter then pursued the motivational component of the research during the analysis and reporting phases.

Dichter was not the only one to move from the Lazarsfeld group into marketing. Another particularly notable figure in this regard is Herta Herzog, who was actually

## BOX 1.2

### DICHTER AT WORK

According to Schwartzkopf (2007), Dichter and his company did over 3,000 marketing studies in the United States for products as diverse as *Esquire* magazine, Ivory soap, Chrysler Motors, Exxon gasoline, and the Barbie doll. At least anecdotally, however, he is best known for his work on Betty Crocker cake mixes.

Once again, the story starts during World War II, when the U.S. military developed cake mixes that included dried milk and dried eggs so that they could be made with only oil and water. These mixes may have been quite convenient, but attempts to sell these new products to housewives after the war were not successful. Dichter investigated

this using a series of group interviews with housewives, and he concluded that using these shortcuts to bake a cake for their family produced feelings of guilt. To resolve that guilt, Dichter recommended reformulating the product so that cooks would add their own egg and thus express their "individuality" (Dichter, 1960, p. 157).

It would be hard to establish that Dichter's advice led to the worldwide success of prepared cake mixes. Nevertheless, Betty Crocker advertisements from the time definitely do feature a woman's out-stretched hand, holding two eggs, next to the text "You add the eggs for that special homemade goodness" (emphasis in the original).

married to Lazarsfeld when he began his collaboration with Merton (although Herzog's career has not received as much attention as Dichter, see Tadjewski, 2015, for some basic information). Shortly after her divorce from Lazarsfeld in 1945, Herzog went to work for McCann and Erickson, a major New York City advertising firm, where she rose to the position of research manager. Like Dichter, she advocated a mix of individual and group depth interviews but without his heavy psychological emphasis.

Despite the manifest role of Lazarsfeld and Merton's work on the origins of focus groups in marketing research, there was a general lack of attention to these social science origins (Calder, 1977; Goldman, 1962). Hence, there was no mention of them in the first book-length treatment on marketing (Goldman & McDonald, 1987), and, when the American Marketing Association published its landmark collection (Higginbotham & Cox, 1979), only four of the 24 articles contained any references, and only one of those mentioned either Lazarsfeld or Merton. There were of course notable exceptions, such as Fern (1982) and Smith (1954), but by and large, the early contributions from Lazarsfeld and Merton were lost. Even relatively recent reviews within marketing sometimes fail to recognize the role of Merton and Lazarsfeld—for example, Levy (2007) in a review article, attributes focus groups to work by social psychologists such as Kurt Lewin and Robert Bales.

Another issue of interest is how the focused interview and the group depth interview become known as the focus group. Searching Google Scholar shows fewer than 20 references in the 1960s and less than 100 in the 1970s. Using an interesting alternative database, Lee (2010) examined documents made public during the investigation of the tobacco industry and its marketing practices, showing that the term “focus group”

### BOX 1.3

#### EARLY USES OF FOCUS GROUPS IN BRITISH MARKETING RESEARCH

The earliest reference to group interviews by a British author is by Mark Abrams (1949), who became a major figure in marketing research in that country. It is impossible to tell if Abrams had any contact with either Merton or Lazarsfeld at this time, because there are no acknowledgments in his article. Still, Lazarsfeld was on the editorial board of the journal where the article appeared, so there may well have been a connection.

By 1950, the Tavistock Institute was using group interviews in its program of marketing research, most notably on the topic of ice cream (Schwartzkopf, 2007). During the 1950s Herta Herzog's firm was actively using depth interviews in Britain, and Dichter opened a branch of his company in 1959 (Bailey, 2014; Schwartzkopf, 2007). Thus, many of the same forces were at work in both the United States and Britain.