

Focus Group Paper

Luis Cruz

Department of Learning and Performance Systems, Pennsylvania State University

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Dr. Siford-Myers

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Table of Contents

<i>Purpose</i>	2
<i>Definition and Characteristics of Focus Groups</i>	2
<i>Background of Focus Groups</i>	4
<i>Benefits of Focus Groups</i>	5
Focus Groups in Organization Development	6
Cost Associated with Focus Groups	6
Virtual Focus Groups	6
<i>Weaknesses of Focus Groups</i>	7
Culturally Diverse Groups and Focus Groups	7
Groupthink	9
Moderation Bias	10
<i>Implications in OD</i>	12
<i>Paper Reflection</i>	12
<i>References</i>	14

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore focus groups in hopes to provide the reader with a better understanding of why focus groups are utilized and can be applicable to the organization development field. Although focus groups may be a key source for gathering qualitative data from participants in topics which are being researched, not all organization development consultants or individuals conducting focus groups will be aware, have a preliminary understanding, or have the information necessary for conducting effective focus groups. This paper will look at the history, benefits, and weaknesses of focus groups as well as look the implications in the organization development field and a reflection concluding the paper.

Definition and Characteristics of Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method used by researchers where individuals play a participating role in discussion with the moderation of a group to study a common subject (Morgan, 1996). Researchers utilize focus groups by creating group discussions to collect data to analyze common themes of data (Morgan, 1996). Ultimately, focus groups are conducted to allow researchers to observe topics from the perspectives of those within the focus group to gain a better understanding of how such topics are perceived (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

According to Kreuger and Casey (2015), focus groups are characterized by “(1) a small group of people, who (2) possess certain characteristics, (3) provide qualitative data (4) in focused discussion (5) to help understand the [researcher’s] topic of interest”. Focus groups typically range in approximately five to eight participants but can also have as little as four participants to approximately 12 participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Although there is no one defined number of the amount participants within a focus group, the group must be a number within the range which still allows all individuals to express adequate input while also having

enough individuals for the group to be mixed (Krueger & Casey, 2015). While small groups allow people to express more ideas than larger groups, they often contain a decreased amount of total collective ideas than larger groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Larger groups of more than 12 individuals can cause the focus group to break up into smaller groups, hindering the efficacy and purpose of the focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Ideally, a researcher will conduct approximately three to four focus groups for each topic until a researcher is no longer receiving new ideas or concepts from the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This is known as focus group saturation (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Figure 1 demonstrates the different characteristics between a single participant interview and focus group interviews.

Figure 1 Comparison between

Criteria	In-depth interview	Nominal group technique	Focus group
Number of participants	1	6-10	6-10
Goal	individual views/experiences	consensus opinion	divergent views/experiences
Interactional quality	no	partial	yes
Level of group influence	N/A	med	med/high
Level of structure	low	high	low
Depth of experiences	deep	shallow	med
Range of experiences	narrow	med	wide
Level of moderator involvement	low	high	low

Note. This model was produced by Powell, R.A. & Single, H.M. (1996) from "Focus Groups." International Journal for Quality in Health Care, 8(5), 499-504.

Background of Focus Groups

Focus groups were first utilized by social scientist in approximately the 1920s in which scientist would interview groups of individuals (Morgan, 1997;1998). They involve the gathering of information from casual discussion ongoing in a group of individuals on set topics (Acocella, 2011). Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld served as Sociologist at Columbia University where they worked together using group interviewing techniques before the start of the Second World War (Morgan, 1997;1998). The creation of the structure used for group interviews was created on November 23, 1941 by both Robert Morton and Paul Lazarsfeld (Morgan, 2021). Initially, Lazarsfeld was using a form of interviewing within groups that was more rigid which incorporated the use of questions which lead the interview (Morgan, 2021). Merton however, utilized a qualitative method which was less rigid which Lazarsfeld then incorporated into the group interviews himself (Morgan, 2021).

Throughout the war, the use of group interviewing flourished, where these methods were used to develop learning materials for the military, evaluation of societal issues within the military, and the generation of propaganda (Morgan, 1997;1998). An article written by Merton, Kendall, and Marjorie Fiske, *The Focused Interview* (1946), identified difficulties which they experienced when interviewing groups which distinguished that were different than when conducting interviews with individuals (Morgan, 1997;1998). This ultimately dictated a need to separate both individual and group interviews – which became focus groups, in social sciences (Morgan, 1997;1998). Despite Robert Merton being considered one of creators of focus groups at the time, after the creation of his publication, *The Focused Interview*, Merton seemed to shift focus away from focus groups, while Lazarsfeld continued his work in the field (Morgan, 2021).

After the second World War focus groups primarily existed for the purpose of market research until the 1980s (Morgan, 1997;1998). Paul Lazarsfeld continued to use group interviews for market research to monitor consumer feedback on radio programming that appeared on air for consumer (Morgan, 1997;1998). The feedback provided from the focus interviews proved to be very successful and created a demand by various marketing groups (Morgan, 1997;1998). Focus groups, also known at the time as group depth interviews continued to gain popularity in studying marketing which still holds a prominent place today (Morgan, 2021). The use of focus groups continued in the field of social sciences, found its way into marketing research, and began to be used in fields such as law and politics (Morgan, 2021). According to the Social Sciences Citation Index in 2020, focus groups has been cited in over 5,000 articles by leading individuals such as Merton et al., Krueger et al., and Bloor et al., indicating the growing popularity and use of focus groups to-date (Morgan, 2021).

Benefits of Focus Groups

Focus groups offer several benefits as a qualitative method. Focus groups can be used to gather immense amounts of data on a breadth of subjects. Along with the previously mentioned areas where focus groups been utilized earlier in the paper, focus groups have also been popular in politics, public health, and education (Morgan, 1996). William Noevlli and Evelyn Folch-Lyon and colleagues worked together to conduct focus groups to understand beliefs and use of contraceptives among the people of Mexico during 1981 (Morgan, 1997;1998). Sociologist have found focus groups to be beneficial when researching sociological subfields including work, medicine, crime, and gerontological populations (Morgan, 1997;1998). With the breadth of fields which focus groups have been useful for, they have been included in the organization development field for qualitative assessment as well.

Focus Groups in Organization Development

Focus groups can be beneficial for organization development efforts as well. They can be used by a consultant to discover how people in an organization feel about a variety of issues such as their happiness with the organization, their drive within the company, and feedback on organizational efficiency (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups allows organizations to better understand employee perspectives, allowing organizational development efforts to be more effective without hastily attempting to induce change which could result in employee resistance (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Cost Associated with Focus Groups

Focus Groups are relatively low-cost methods to gather data for qualitative analysis. According to Evaluating Bang for the Buck: A Cost-Effectiveness Comparison Between Individual Interviews and Focus Groups Based on Thematic Saturation levels conducted by Namey et al. (2016), researchers conducted 40 individual interviews and 40 focus groups and analyzed the cost associated with each to saturation. Despite the cost of the individuals being slightly less expensive, the time taken to conduct the interviews was longer and took anywhere between eight and 16 interviews to reach saturation (Namey et al., 2016). The focus groups took approximately between three and five focus groups to reach saturation (Namey et al, 2016). The cost related to the individual interviews ranged between \$1,917 to \$4,763 while the focus group interviews ranged in cost from \$2,346 - \$5,435.

Virtual Focus Groups

Focus Groups can be conducted virtually now which enable cost of focus groups to be lower than in-person focus groups thus making virtual platforms even more popular for sessions

(Rupert et al., 2017). In order for virtual focus groups to be successful, they are not limited strictly to video-based virtual platforms (Rupert et al., 2017). For focus groups to be considered virtual, sessions can take place telephonically, via video session, or virtual chat session (Rupert et al., 2017). Virtual focus groups also allow sessions to be schedule faster and do not require people to travel to site, further reducing issues with traffic and weather elements (Rupert et al., 2017). Virtual focus groups allow for greater geographic diversity created by the online platforms inhibiting the need for participants to travel (Rupert et al., 2017).

Weaknesses of Focus Groups

Despite virtual focus group focus groups being convenient there are some downsides to conducting virtual sessions as well. Although they can be considered a less expensive method to conduct focus group interviews, researchers argue that more time is required beforehand to prepare for the focus groups (Rupert et al., 2017). Analyst in Virtual Versus In-Person Focus Groups: Comparison of Costs, Recruitment, and participant Logistics by Rupert et. al, (2017); explained that a significant amount of time was dedicated by researchers to generate electronic consent forms, have participants sign the forms, upload the focus group questions via chat, and troubleshooting technical-related issues (Rupert et al., 2017). Researchers must be cognizant of which virtual platforms to utilize, and some populations may not have experience utilizing some virtual platforms to effectively contribute to focus group interviews.

Culturally Diverse Groups and Focus Groups

Working with participants across different cultures may prove to be difficult for researchers seeking qualitative data from focus groups. According to Challenges and Strategies for Conducting Survey and Focus Group Research with Culturally Diverse Groups by Huer and

Saenz (2003), it is important for researchers to be aware of potential mistakes which could originate when conducting focus groups with diverse groups including erroneous language or mistranslation of questions. For example -- some terms, such as a disability, may be mean something differently contextually than what focus group researchers are trying to study. (Huer & Saenz, 2003). Researchers must also account and take time to prepare by understanding the past, how individuals collaborate and work together within the culture, as well as customs within the prospective focus group (Huer & Saenz, 2003).

It is also important to consider the type of data which focus group researchers are looking to gather as they may be considered culturally sensitive topics and may cause cultural mistrust and inhibit participants from disclosing sought after information. (Huer & Saenz, 2003). In example, focus groups directed at understanding institutional racism or discrimination of African Americans can cause mistrust and prevent researchers from obtaining data related to the subject. (Huer & Saenz, 2003). In another example, Vietnamese Americans have been reluctant to share information regarding traditional medicine which was used in Vietnam which caused legal issues with citizens which utilized the traditional medicine (Huer & Saenz, 2003). Focus groups which are diverse may also trouble participants as they fear of being judged unfairly and critically by others which is why anonymity and subtlety may enhance contributions of diverse groups (Huer & Saenz, 2003).

Individuals conducting focus groups must be aware while creating questions and tools used to gather qualitative data in culturally diverse populations (Huer & Saenz, 2003).

Researchers must consider and acknowledge taking additional time and resources dedicated to determining how to enter and build rapport with the culturally diverse group of interest, understand variances in communication including written and verbal, and consider if cultural

mistrust could be detrimental to the focus group (Huer & Saenz, 2003). If researchers fail to consider such concepts when exploring focus groups among culturally diverse populations, data which the analysts are seeking may only be partly provided and not completely representatives of thoughts and beliefs of those participating in the focus groups.

Groupthink

Groupthink, a term originally coined by Irving Janis, is a type of thinking that occurs within unified groups in which a participant or participants choose to withhold and fail to express their personal beliefs or feelings in order to prevent deviation from a groups collective way of thinking or decision (Janis, 1991). Janis continues to explain that groupthink, “refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures” (Janis, 1991). Some of the most notable and extreme cases of groupthink which caused catastrophes included the Challenger disaster and the Bay of Pigs invasion plan (Janis, 1991). Some characteristics which can be observed when groupthink is present include a participants’ failure to disclose their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs to a group to provide the illusion that they conform and believe in the group’s overall ideas (Janis, 1991). Additionally, individuals choose to suppress instead of sharing their thoughts, beliefs, or feelings - giving the impression that the group is in uniform decision or agreement over a subject (Janis, 1991). Failure to recognize groupthink in focus groups can result in researchers failing to collect all data from a group regarding a topic leading to a misunderstanding of the topic being researched as well as failed and costly attempts to collect data.

Groupthink within focus groups is considered a disadvantage in the qualitative data collection methods causing participants within the group to adhere to opinions expressed by others instead of sharing their own beliefs (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). One solution to prevent

groupthink is for the moderators to appoint a devil's advocate to the group (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). The devil's advocate is responsible for generating new concerns within the group topics in a passive manner (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). To prevent the devil's advocate from falling into groupthink, a moderator should consistently appoint the role of devil's advocate to new individuals within the group (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). The devil's advocate must not become complacent in their role and actively contribute without being inconsiderate, aggressive, or bad-mannered (MacDougall & Baum, 1997).

When using focus groups which are within organizations, it is best to ensure that people are within similar hierarchical roles and quell voices which could potentially become overwhelmingly dominant through a well-mixed and diverse focus group (Smithson, 2000). In *The Devil's Advocate: A Strategy to Avoid Groupthink and Stimulate Discussion in Focus Groups* by MacDougall and Baum (1997), in their four focus groups which utilized devil's advocates, participants found their use to be overwhelmingly beneficial in all four groups. Participants within the group found the devil's advocate to be constructive towards and helped the group provide more diverse perspectives (MacDougall & Baum, 1997).

Moderation Bias

With moderators playing an important role in focus groups, it is important to individuals to be aware of moderation bias and the potential pitfalls of such bias. Moderation is when the individual leading the group has an effect on the responses of individuals participating within a focus group inadvertently or purposely (*What are the most common biases in focus group discussions?*, 2023). Examples of this included a moderator using body languages which impacts feedback provided, exudes preferentialism towards certain individuals within the focus group, asks leading questions, or conveys their own feelings which can influence members of the focus

group (*What are the most common biases in focus group discussions?*, 2023) Moderation bias can include the subject of the focus group, the individuals involved in the focus group, the procedure and design, as well as the analysis of the data resulting from the focus group (Prince & Davies, 2001).

According to Prince and Davies (2001), moderators who also have experience and are ‘scientifically trained’ are deemed more effective at handling a wider range of focus group moderation than typical moderators. Scientific moderators are considered individuals which have been sought and obtained a degree in a social science beyond a bachelor’s degree (Prince and Davies, 2001). Moderator characteristics which may encourage and increase participant feedback include moderators which are relaxed, humorous, open-minded, avid listeners, and those who encourage feedback through natural conversation (Prince and Davies, 2001).

One solution which researchers can utilize to decrease the likelihood of moderation bias is to have a facilitator from or familiar with a similar cultural environment as participants (Smithson, 2000). Researchers can also deploy multiple trained and seasoned moderators to facilitate the focus group sessions as well (Prince & Davies, 2001). Moderators are then capable of monitor the individual moderators to ensure focus group sessions held are neutral and can provide feedback after sessions to improve moderation of the focus groups (Prince & Davies, 2001). Nonverbal cues and the way which a moderator asks questions can illicit contaminated feedback from focus group participants ultimately manipulating data which researchers are attempting to collect. By providing more than one moderator researchers are able to check and balance the moderation of focus groups ensuring high quality data for analysts to examine (Prince & Davies, 2001).

Implications in OD

Because of the time constraints and resources, it is more beneficial for practitioners looking to obtain qualitative data to utilize focus groups instead of conducting interviews individually with participants (Jackson, 2014). Although virtual focus groups may be more convenient and more cost effective than traditional focus groups, organization development practitioners can also neglect the non-verbal cues participants may provide during focus groups that may provide essential information from individuals when conducting virtual focus groups via chat or telephonically (Matoesian & Coldren, 2002). To prevent this, one solution is for practitioners to only use video virtual focus groups in which consent is obtained to record or for practitioners to utilize in person focus interviews.

Groupthink is also something which organization development practitioners should be aware of which can occur when working within organizations. Because of the hierarchical nature of most organizations, groupthink can occur in focus groups where leaders are authority figures are mixed into focus groups, causing the suppression of feelings and opinions from others. It may also cause the illusion to organization practitioners of a collective and uniform themes within the focus group, when in reality some individuals prefer not to share out of discomfort or fear (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). Although heterogeneous focus groups are needed for data collection purposes, separate focus groups which divide leaders and managers from other employees can be useful to prevent a misrepresentation of data (MacDougall & Baum, 1997).

Paper Reflection

I found researching this paper to be very beneficial in providing an outlook into focus groups and would think it would be an interesting project for potential extra credit within the Assessing Data in Organizations course. As a student in the Master of Professional Studies

program, I recognize that some students may have experience within their careers conducting focus groups and interviews while also having preliminary experience within the organization development field. Therefore, I see an assignment such as this as a chance to benefit students who may be lacking the experience and help to bridge the gap for students who may be lacking the career experience which would provide them with the opportunity to conduct focus groups. As an individual who is transitioning from a microbiological and chemical career background though, I had a very basic understanding of what a focus group, the characteristics of focus groups, as well as the advantages and disadvantages that exist when conducting focus groups.

This assignment has provided me with a better understanding of focus groups and their use within the organization development field. It allowed me to understand the typical characteristics of focus groups, how they typically run for one to two hours per session. I also gained an understanding that it is important for researchers conducting focus groups to complete more than one session on any given topic and that reaching saturation is important when collecting data for focus groups. The research provided me with an understanding of groupthink and how it can also affect focus groups as well as solutions to mitigate groupthink in the focus group setting. Overall, I found this to be tremendously beneficial and provided me with a better preliminary understanding of focus groups, as well as rich data sources such as Kreuger and Robert Merton which can be turned to in the future to obtain more information on focus groups as needed for reference.

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