



# The Focus Group Method

18 Articles on Design & Moderating

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 18 articles appearing in [Research Design Review](#) from 2010 to early 2020 concerning the focus group method. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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# Beyond Saturation: Using Data Quality Indicators to Determine the Number of Focus Groups to Conduct

*The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 130-131).*

Qualitative researchers are routinely faced with the decision of how many in-depth interviews (IDIs) or focus group discussions to conduct. This decision often revolves around time-cost-benefit trade-off considerations fueled by the tension between neither wanting to conduct too many nor too few IDIs or focus groups.

When it comes to the focus group method, the decision of how many group discussions to conduct is based on any number of factors and will vary depending on the situation for each study. However, a few of the critical factors that the prudent researcher will think about when considering the number of discussions at the outset for any focus group study are the:



- **Geographic range of the target population**, e.g., whether the target population for in-person groups is located in one city or spread across the U.S.
- **Depth of the discussions**, i.e., the number of topics/issues and questions expected to be covered to satisfy research objectives. For example, fewer group discussions may be necessary if the primary research objective is to learn mothers' preferences for shelf-stable baby food, while a greater number of groups may be needed if the objective is to understand mothers' preferences across all types of baby food and, specifically, to investigate the priority they place on nutritional and organic foods.
- **Homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group participants**. Using the example above, more groups will be required if the mothers of interest range in age from 25-40 years as well as in income level and if there is reason to believe that attitudes and behavior vary across these demographic characteristics.

- **Variation in results that is expected** to occur across the different focus groups that will be conducted. If there is little variation expected from one group to another (e.g., if group participants are highly homogeneous, or the attitudes among participants in New York are not expected to be different than those in Dallas), then only a few focus groups may suffice. If there is a great deal of variation expected, then many focus groups will be required to fully measure the range of experiences, attitudes, and knowledge the participants will have to impart in the discussions.
- **Project schedule** and amount of available time to complete the study.
- **Research budget** that is available to fund the study.

It is this assortment of factors that cause qualitative researchers to generally disagree on the optimal number of focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2009, p. 21) state that “the accepted rule of thumb is to plan three or four focus groups with each type or category of individual.” Kitzinger (1994) and her colleagues conducted 52 group discussions concerning the media coverage of AIDS among broad, diverse population groups across England, Scotland, and Wales; and Peek and Fothergill (2009) reported conducting 23 discussions with Muslim American students due, in part, to the need to segment groups by gender. Yet others, such as McLafferty (2004) use the concept of saturation (i.e., conducting group discussions only to the point when no new information is being gleaned) as their “guiding principle” when determining if the appropriate number of groups have been conducted.

Although the considerations listed above may assist the researcher during the research design phase to establish the number of groups to conduct, it does little to help evaluate the set-upon number when in the field. To be clear, it can be expensive and disruptive to the research process to cancel or add group sessions to a focus group study that is underway (particularly, when conducting in-person discussions that require reserving and making arrangements with brick-and-mortar facilities); however, it is important for the focus group researcher to assess all the components of his or her research design – including the number of group discussions – throughout the process.

The question of how many group discussions to conduct raises a host of issues associated with data quality. Similar to IDIs\*, the researcher’s assessment of the number of focus groups to conduct while in the field goes way beyond the concept of data saturation and takes into account quality concerns such as the degree to which:

- All key constructs have been covered in all discussions.
- The moderator clearly understands the feedback and responses obtained in each discussion.
- Research objectives have been met.
- Variations in the data can be explained.
- Reflection reveals that the moderator maintained objectivity throughout all discussions.
- The data inform the subject matter.
- Triangulation confirms or denies the researcher's initial hypotheses.
- The discussions have divulged a story that explains the research question for each of the population segments or sub-groups.
- Opportunities for further research have emerged from the discussions.

An important additional component to this assessment, that is *unlike* that for IDIs, is the interactivity or group dynamics within the discussions. Specifically, the researcher needs to carefully consider the degree to which participants in all groups equally shared their experiences and thoughts during the discussions. If, for instance, one or more focus groups were dominated by a small number of participants who were outspoken on the issues, the researcher should be cautious when assessing the value of these discussion groups (in terms of the credibility of measurement) and consider these dominant-participant groups in the determination of the number of groups to conduct.

\* See [“Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?”](#)

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103–121.

Peek, L., & Fothergill, A. (2009). Using focus groups: Lessons from studying daycare centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. *Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 31–59.

McLafferty, I. (2004). Focus group interviews as a data collecting strategy. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(2), 187–194.

Image captured from: <https://asure-chan.deviantart.com/art/Saturation-395888724>



# Guide Development & the Integrity of Qualitative Research Data

The funnel four-stage approach to in-depth interview (IDI) and focus group guide development is an effective and efficient method for gaining key insights among



qualitative research participants within an allotted time frame. A 2015 article in *Research Design Review* offers a schematic of this approach and outlines the intended purpose associated with each of the four basic stages (see [“Interview Guide Development: A 4-Stage ‘Funnel’ Approach”](#)).

But what exactly does “effective and efficient” mean as it relates to guide development, and why should we care? The answers lie in the fact that a thoughtful funnel approach to guide development enables the researcher to derive quality data from their qualitative research while achieving research objectives and maximizing the ultimate usefulness of the outcomes. By having a clear understanding of what it means to develop an interview or discussion guide that is both effective and efficient, the researcher has added greatly to the integrity of the qualitative research data and design.

There are at least six ways that the funnel four-stage approach to guide development is important to the effectiveness and efficiency of IDI and focus group research. The funnel approach:

- **Mitigates bias.** Progressively moving to the primary topic of interest allows the interviewer/moderator to gather an understanding of perceptions and behavior unblemished by the researcher’s own agenda.
- **Helps identify variations.** The general-to-narrow approach inherently provides the researcher with the necessary fundamental information that is needed to compare and contrast earlier comments with participants’ later remarks. In this way, the interviewer/moderator is able to identify variations in what is being said and conduct the necessary follow-up.

- **Fosters rapport through a friendly flow of conversation.** By beginning the interview or discussion with questions that are general in nature, the interviewer/moderator is facilitating the researcher-participant relationship in a conversational and non-threatening way.
- **Reduces repetition.** The flow of conversation that is grounded in a general-to-narrow method logically circumvents the potential problem of inappropriately repeating the same or similar topic areas or asking redundant questions.
- **Encourages engagement and cooperation.** Just as the funnel approach facilitates rapport building through conversation, it also creates an atmosphere in which participants feel emboldened to engage with the researcher and, in focus groups, with the other participants. This heightened level of cooperation fuels otherwise hidden insights which in turn help to mitigate bias and bolster data quality.
- **Aids in analysis.** By mitigating bias, helping to identify variations in the data, fostering rapport, reducing repetition, and encouraging engagement and cooperation, the funnel approach to guide development ultimately advances data analysis. The analyst is able to discern categories and themes, as well as outliers, in the data in a straightforward way based on well-thought-out transitions in the conversations.

Image capture from: <http://www.modernvillagallery.com/artists-2/sarah-goodnough/>

# Focus Groups: A Not-So-Plain Vanilla Choice in Research

Focus groups are ubiquitous to the point that, for some, they have become the plain vanilla choice in our ever-eclectic assortment of flavors in research methods. Yet, there are many (many) design considerations that complicate focus group research while directly impacting the credibility, analyzability, and, ultimately, usefulness of the outcomes. One such consideration is discussed here.



Fundamental to the design of a focus group study is group composition. More specifically, it must be determined the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity the researcher wants represented by the group participants. There is any number of questions the researcher needs to contemplate, such as the participants’:

- Age range and/or stage of life.
- Race.
- Ethnicity.
- Income or socioeconomic level.
- Level of education.
- Profession or job (including, job title).
- Community of residence.
- Group or organization association.
- Involvement, experience, or knowledge with the research topic, e.g., product usage activity, purchase behavior, level of expertise using new technology.

Whether or not – or the degree to which – group participants should be homogeneous in some or all characteristics has been at the center of debate for some years. On the one hand, [GrønkJaer, et al.](#) (2011) claim that, “homogeneity in focus group construction is considered essential for group interaction and dynamics” and, in the same vein, [Julius Sim](#) has found in his health research that, “the more homogeneous the membership of the group, in terms of social background, level of education, knowledge, and experience, the more confident individual group members are likely to be in voicing their views.” Even among strangers, there is a certain amount of comfort and safety in the group environment when the participants share key demographic characteristics and relevant experience. A problem arises, however, when this comfortable, safe environment



breeds a single-mindedness (or “groupthink”) that, without the tactics of a skillful moderator, can stifle divergent thinking and result in erroneous, one-sided interpretations of the findings. Heterogeneity of group participants (e.g., including product users and nonusers in the same focus group) potentially heads off these problems by stimulating different points of view and a depth of understanding that comes from listening to participants “defend” their way of thinking (e.g., product preferences). In addition to a heightened level of diversity, heterogeneous groups may also be a very pragmatic choice for the researcher who is working with limited time and financial resources, or whose target population for the research is confined to a very specific group (e.g., nurses working at a community hospital).

The answer to the question of whether group participants should be homogeneous or heterogeneous is “it depends.” As a general rule, group participants should represent similar experiences with or knowledge of the research topic (e.g., experience using the Web to diagnose a health problem, weekly consumption of skim milk), but the need for “sameness” among participants on other parameters can fluctuate depending on the circumstance. For example, homogeneity of age can be particularly important in non-Western countries where younger people may believe it is disrespectful to offer comments that differ from those stated by their elders. Homogeneous groups are also typically important when investigating sensitive topics, such as drug use among teenagers, when a more mixed group of participants may not only choke the discussion but lead to a struggle for control among participants. Homogeneity of gender, on the other hand, may or may not be important to the success (usefulness) of a focus group study. To illustrate: A company conducting employee focus group research to explore employees’ attitudes toward recent shifts in management would conduct separate groups with men and women in order to discover how the underlying emotional response to new management differs between male and female employees. In contrast, a focus group study among customers of the local electric utility company might benefit from including both men and women in the discussion where the varied reactions to the company’s bill inserts would serve to stimulate thinking and enrich the research findings.

Group composition is just one consideration when designing a focus group study. There are many others. Focus group research is anything but vanilla.

# Focus Groups: Heterogeneity vs. Homogeneity

The following is a modified excerpt from [\*Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach\*](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 107-109).



Fundamental to the design of a focus group study is group composition. Specifically, the researcher must determine the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity that should be represented by the group participants. As shown below, there are many questions the researcher needs to contemplate, such as the extent of similarity or dissimilarity in participants' demographic characteristics, as well as in their experiences and involvement with the subject matter.

## Questions When Considering Heterogeneity vs. Homogeneity

A few of the questions the focus group researcher might consider when determining the desired heterogeneity or homogeneity among group participants include:

- Should participants be in the same age range and/or stage of life?
- Should participants be the same gender, race, and/or ethnicity?
- Should participants be at a similar income, socio-economic, or educational level?
- Should participants reside in the same community, be members of the same organization(s)?
- Should participants have similar professions or jobs (including, job titles)?
- Should participants have a similar involvement, experience, or knowledge with the research topic, e.g., the same types of problems with their 13 year old boys? the same healthcare service provider? the same purchase behavior? the same level of expertise with a new technology?

Whether or not—or the degree to which—group participants should be homogeneous in some or all characteristics has been at the center of debate for some years. On the one hand, Grønkjær, Curtis, Crespigny, and Delmar (2011) claim that at least some “homogeneity in focus group construction is considered

essential for group interaction and dynamics” (p. 23)—for example, participants belonging to the same age group may have similar frames of reference and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with people who have lived through the same experience. In the same vein, Sim (1998) states that, “the more homogeneous the membership of the group, in terms of social background, level of education, knowledge, and experience, the more confident individual group members are likely to be in voicing their [own] views” (p. 348). Even among strangers, there is a certain amount of comfort and safety in the group environment when the participants share key demographic characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and/or relevant experience.

A problem arises, however, if this comfortable, safe environment breeds a single-mindedness (or “groupthink”) that, without the tactics of a skillful moderator, can stifle divergent thinking and result in erroneous, one-sided data. Heterogeneity of group participants (e.g., including users and nonusers of a particular child care service within the same focus group) potentially heads off these problems by stimulating different points of view and a depth of understanding that comes from listening to participants “defend” their way of thinking (e.g., product or service preferences). As Grønkjær et al. (2011) state, “a group may be too homogeneous; thus influencing the range and variety of the data that emerges” (p. 26). The tension that heterogeneity may create in a group discussion can serve to uncover deeper insights into what is being studied, providing the moderator is able to channel this tension in constructive directions. In addition to a heightened level of diversity, heterogeneous groups may also be a very pragmatic choice for the researcher who is working with limited time and financial resources, or whose target population for the research is confined to a very narrow group (e.g., nurses working at a community hospital).

Ultimately, the answer to the question of whether group participants should be homogeneous or heterogeneous is “it depends.” As a general rule, group participants should have similar experiences with, or knowledge of, the research topic (e.g., using the Web to diagnose a health problem, weekly consumption of fat-free milk), but the need for “sameness” among participants on other parameters can fluctuate depending on the circumstance. Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, and Davidson (2007), for example, report that homogeneity of age is particularly important in non-Western countries where younger people may believe it is disrespectful to offer comments that differ from those stated by their elders. Homogeneous groups are also important when investigating sensitive topics, such as drug use among teenagers, where a more mixed group of participants with people who are perceived as “different” (in terms of demographics and knowledge/experience with drugs) may choke the discussion and lead to a struggle

for control among participants (e.g., one or more participants trying to dominate the discussion).

Homogeneity of gender, on the other hand, may or may not be important to the success (usefulness) of a focus group study. For example, an organization conducting employee focus group research to explore employees' attitudes toward recent shifts in management would need to conduct separate groups with men and women in order to discover how the underlying emotional response to new management differs between male and female employees. In contrast, a focus group study among city residents concerning public transportation might benefit from including both men and women in the same discussion, among whom the varied use and perceptions of the transportation services would serve to stimulate thinking and enrich the research findings. The heightened level of dynamics in groups that are heterogeneous in gender and other aspects may also provoke conversations on taboo subjects (e.g., racism) that might not be forthcoming in other methods such as in-depth interviews.

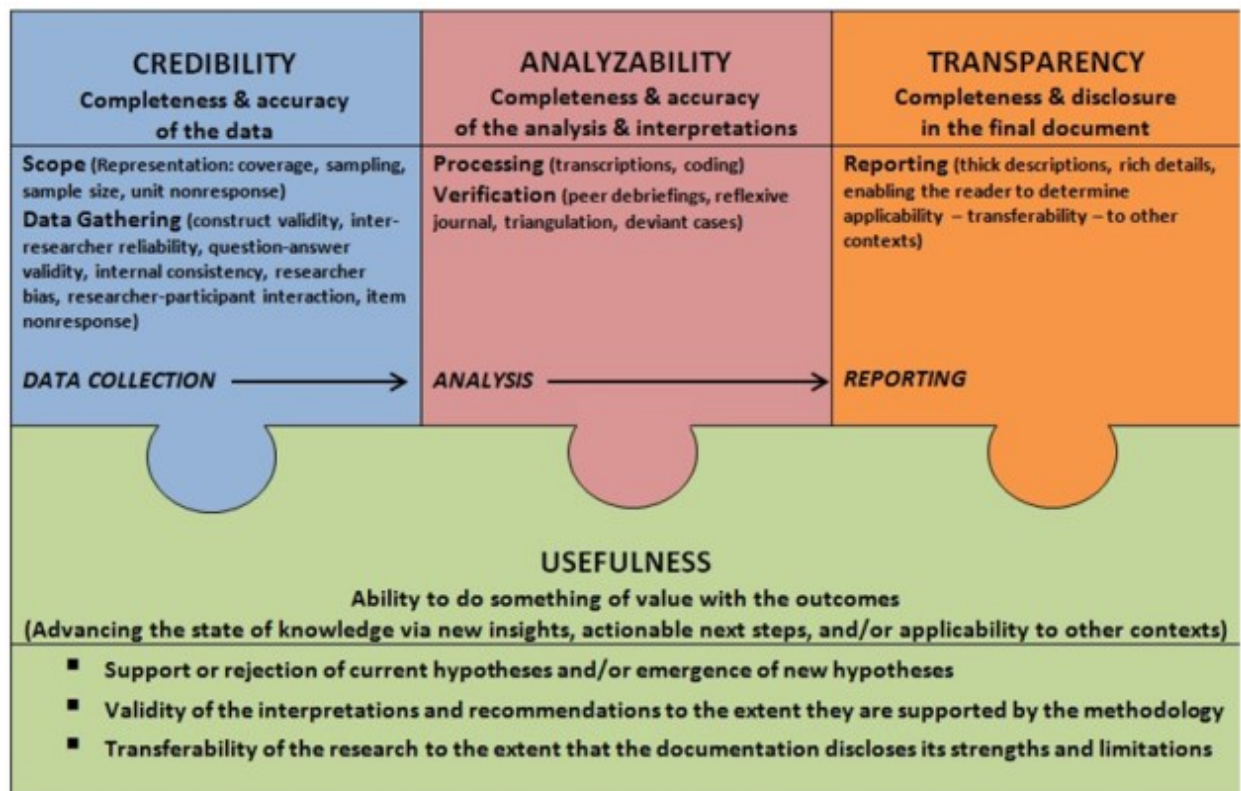
Grønkjær, M., Curtis, T., de Crespigny, C., & Delmar, C. (2011). Analysing group interaction in focus group research: Impact on content and the role of the moderator. *Qualitative Studies*, 2(1), 16–30.

Halcomb, E. J., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M., Phillips, J., & Davidson, P. M. (2007). Literature review: Considerations in undertaking focus group research with culturally and linguistically diverse groups. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 16(6), 1000–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2006.01760.x>

Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analysing qualitative data: Issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(2), 345–352. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9725732>

Images captured/created from: <https://www.thoughtco.com/heterogeneous-definition-and-example-606355>

# Mode Differences in Focus Group Discussions



From: *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. New York: Guilford Press)

There are four components to the Total Quality Framework in qualitative research design. The first component, Credibility, has to do with data collection; specifically, the completeness and accuracy of the data collected. There are two critical facets to Credibility – Scope (coverage and representation) and Data Gathering (bias, nonresponse, and how well [or not] particular constructs are measured).

The second component is Analyzability. This component is concerned with the completeness and accuracy of the analyses and interpretations. The Analyzability component is concerned with Processing (e.g., the use of transcriptions, coding) and Verification (e.g., by way of triangulation, deviant cases, and/or a reflexive journal).

By looking at just these two components of the TQF, what judgments can we make as to the strengths and limitations of the various modes we might choose from for any given method? For example, three of the most common modes for focus group discussions are: face-to-face, phone, and online (asynchronous). Each of these modes has implications related to data collection and analysis. The tables (below) present a few of these considerations. With respect to “strengths,” for instance, the



face-to-face mode has the advantage of facilitating rapport building as well as data verification by way of observers. The phone mode, on the other hand, extends the coverage (which can be particularly important in conducting research with hard-to-reach segments); while the asynchronous online mode typically results in lengthy, detailed responses that are conveniently and immediately available in transcription form.

#### **Focus Group Modes**

	Credibility	Analyzability
<b>Strengths</b>		
Face-to-face	Most similar to natural conversation (dynamic & interactive), facilitates building rapport, can use a broad range of moderator techniques, easily share a broad range of stimuli, refreshments aid cooperation & rapport, immediate distribution of cash incentives.	Can audio &/or video record, visual cues add meaning, verification via observers who offer a different perspective, various data sources – audio, video, in-discussion writing/drawing exercises.
Phone	Scope (wide coverage, more groups, hard-to-reach segments), gaining cooperation (convenience in scheduling, participation), absence of visual cues that may bias, willingness to discuss sensitive topics.	Can audio record, possibly verify via “observers” listening in.
Online (asynchronous)	Scope (wide geographic coverage, hard-to-reach segments), gaining cooperation (convenience of scheduling, participation), detailed responses, sense of anonymity, (potentially) a lot of interaction, moderator/participants can share photos, video, other media.	Built-in transcripts, detailed content to analyze, online platforms offer a high level of functionality, e.g., tagging, word clouds, exporting.

**Credibility:** Number of groups, gaining cooperation, use of techniques, moderator bias (inappropriate comments, appearance), moderator inconsistency (concept/definition presentation), participant effects (rapport, willingness to share attitudes, paying attention to verbal and visual cues).

**Analyzability:** Various data sources, participant interaction, transcriptions/transcriptionists, verification (observers).

There are also certain limitations of these modes related to data collection and analysis. Coverage, for instance, can be a problem and fewer groups may be possible due to scant resources when attempting to conduct face-to-face focus groups, and the absence of visual cues (when no photos or video are used) hamper the analysis of phone and online discussions.

### Focus Group Modes

	Credibility	Analyzability
<b>Limitations</b>		
Face-to-face	Scope (coverage, fewer groups), gaining cooperation (convenience in scheduling, participation), moderator bias (appearance, must be skilled in managing group dynamics), dominating participants can control the outcomes & prevent others from speaking, participant effects (unwillingness to engage).	Data may be incomplete because the group interaction environment stifled some participants, i.e., not everyone was heard.
Phone	Less natural form of discussion, weakened ability to establish rapport, absence of visual cues that aid in interpretation, shorter discussion length/less in-depth, participants may be distracted or inattentive (moderator needs to make a special effort to foster a lively discussion & ensure that everyone has spoken).	Lack of visual cues to aid in interpretation.
Online (asynchronous)	Scope (coverage bias, e.g., certain demographic segments, people with limited literacy), weakened ability to establish rapport & keep discussion on track, text is primary form of communication, ethical considerations.	The impressions that participants give through their text can negatively impact the quality of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

**Credibility:** Number of groups, gaining cooperation, use of techniques, moderator bias (inappropriate comments, appearance), moderator inconsistency (concept/definition presentation), participant effects (rapport, willingness to share attitudes, paying attention to verbal and visual cues).

**Analyzability:** Various data sources, participant interaction, transcriptions/transcriptionists, verification (observers).

# First Consider In-person Focus Group Discussions

*The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 115).*

The online asynchronous mode of focus group discussions has been discussed elsewhere in *Research Design*

*Review*, including [“Credibility & the Online Asynchronous Focus Group Method”](#) and [“The Asynchronous Focus Group Method: Participant Participation & Transparency.”](#)

Although this approach to focus groups is important, e.g., in gaining cooperation from certain segments of the population and for particular research topics, there are many reasons to first consider in-person focus group discussions.



Group interviewing in the in-person mode has the advantage of being a **natural form of communication**. Even in the social media, online world we live in today, the scenario of people sitting together and sharing their opinions and experiences is generally considered a socially acceptable form in the everyday lives of humans. And it is this natural way of communicating that ignites the dynamic, interactive environment that is, in many ways, the *raison d'être* of the focus group method. As the primary strength of the group discussion method, participant interaction is maximized in the in-person, face-to-face mode where the back-and-forth conversation can be spontaneous and easygoing. For example, Nicholas et al. (2010) found, in their study with children suffering from a chronic health problem (e.g., cerebral palsy), that “most preferred to express themselves verbally” (p. 115) in the face-to-face (vs. online) format because it allowed them to (a) give input immediately without waiting for typed responses, (b) gain feedback from the other participants straightaway, (c) show the emotional intensity of their feelings (i.e., display visual cues), and (d) potentially develop relationships with their peers beyond the confines of the specific focus group in which they participated.

This last point (i.e., **potentially developing relationships**) is particularly relevant to group discussions conducted with a wide variety of target populations. In the author’s experience, it is common for men who have recently hiked the Appalachian Trail, for example, to exchange tips on hiking gear or share photographs at the conclusion of a group discussion; or for special education

teachers to swap contact information so they can continue to share teaching methods; or for business executives to stay after a focus group to chat and learn more about each other's work.

In-person, face-to-face group discussions also offer the moderator, as well as participants and the observers, the advantage of seeing the **nonverbal signals**—for example, a nod of the head, loss of eye contact, a blush, smile, frown, grimace—that people consciously or unconsciously exhibit in the course of discussion.

Furthermore, the in-person focus group mode significantly **broadens the scope of the discussion interview**, as well as the cache of **interviewing techniques** at the moderator's disposal, compared to either the telephone or online group discussion approach. The facilities where in-person focus groups are conducted are typically well equipped with (a) wall railings to display visual stimuli; (b) built-in audiovisual equipment for presenting videos, websites, and other material to participants; (c) easel pads to note participants' comments or illustrate a concept; and (d) an abundance of writing pads, pens/pencils, and other supplies for use by the moderator for participant activities during the discussion. These facilities are also in service to provide **refreshments** to the participants, contributing to the relaxed social nature of the discussion; as well as **immediate payment** to participants of their earned incentive for participating in the discussion.

These advantages offer the qualitative researcher plenty of reasons to think first of the in-person mode when considering the focus group method.

Nicholas, D. B., Lach, L., King, G., Scott, M., Boydell, K., Sawatzky, B., ... Young, N. L. (2010). Contrasting Internet and face-to-face focus groups for children with chronic health conditions : Outcomes and participant experiences. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9(1), 105–122.

Image captured from: <https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/focus-group-discussions-6628206333.html>

# Limitations of In-person Focus Group Discussions

*The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 116-119).*

The interactive, dynamic aspect of the focus group discussion method is its greatest potential strength as well as its greatest potential liability. This is especially the

case in the face-to-face, in-person mode where the close physical proximity of participants can unleash any number of factors that will threaten data quality if left unchecked.



One of the most important factors is the **caliber of the discussion**; specifically, the extent to which all participants have a fair chance of voicing their input. This is critical because the success of the group discussion method hinges on generating a true discussion where everyone present participates in a dialogue with the other group members and, to a lesser degree, with the

moderator. A true participatory discussion, however, can be easily jeopardized in the social context of the in-person focus group (as well as the online synchronous discussion mode) because one or more participants either talk too much (i.e., dominate the discussion) or talk too little (i.e., are hesitant to express their views). In either case, the quality of the data will be compromised by the failure to capture the viewpoints of all participants, leading to erroneous interpretations of the outcomes.

The potentially negative impact that the face-to-face group interaction can have on data quality is an important consideration in qualitative research design, yet this impact—or, the effect of group interaction on the research—is often overlooked when conducting the analyses and reporting the outcomes. Researchers who have explored the **role of interaction** in focus group research include Grønkjær et al. (2011) and Moen, Antonov, Nilsson, and Ring (2010). Grønkjær et al. analyzed the “interactional events” in five focus groups they conducted with Danes on the use and perceptions of alcohol and determined, for example, that “disagreements between participants can function as a catalyst to keep the focus group discussion going” (p. 26). Moen et al. used an interaction “template” contrived by Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin (2006) to analyze focus groups conducted with patients and physicians concerning their perceptions of multiple medicine use. Interaction



effects, and specifically the Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin template, are discussed more fully in [this RDR post](#).

An important aspect of the interaction effect is the **influence the moderator has on group dynamics**. In addition to the many factors associated with [interviewer bias](#) and training in the in-depth interviewing method, there is also the issue of how the moderator manages the group interaction and how this management affects the direction of the outcomes. For instance, in their group discussions concerning alcohol use in Denmark, Grønkjær et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of the moderator's "continuous assessment of the interactions between various participants" (p. 25), while maintaining the status of moderator and resisting the urge to speak as a health professional by interrupting the interaction with expert knowledge.

Another limitation with many in-person focus groups is the **low level of cooperation** that is often achieved when recruiting people to attend a particular session. This may be because people are reluctant (or too shy or socially self-conscious) to agree to spend 90 minutes or 2 hours interacting with complete strangers, or because face-to-face focus groups are held at a central location, mandating that all participants attend at the same place and the same time. There may be people in the target population who are invited to participate in a group discussion but who refuse (despite the offer of a cash incentive payment) because of scheduling conflicts or the inconvenience of traveling to a central facility. The logistics can be particularly troublesome for people with disabilities, health issues, or no means of transportation. Linked to this lower level of initial cooperation is the reality that people who do agree to participate in an in-person discussion may not actually show up due to unexpected scheduling conflicts, transportation difficulties, or just a last-minute unwillingness to venture from home or office to travel to the location of the group session. In the end, the researcher must seriously consider the idea that the people who elected to attend the in-person focus group may differ in significant ways from those who chose not to cooperate with the research.

Grønkjær, M., Curtis, T., de Crespigny, C., & Delmar, C. (2011). Analysing group interaction in focus group research: Impact on content and the role of the moderator. *Qualitative Studies*, 2(1), 16–30.

Lehoux, P., Poland, B., & Daudelin, G. (2006). Focus group research and "the patient's view." *Social Science & Medicine*, 63(8), 2091–2104.

Moen, J., Antonov, K., Nilsson, J. L. G., & Ring, L. (2010). Interaction between participants in focus groups with older patients and general practitioners. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(5), 607–616.

Image captured from: <https://www.seton.com/reflective-warning-signs-swerving-car-symbol-vc1687.html>

# Focus Groups: Moving to the Online Face-to-face Mode

There are many articles in *Research Design Review* about the focus group method. They range from broad discussions concerning the [strengths](#) and [limitations](#) of focus group discussions in qualitative research, to [determining the number of groups to conduct](#) for a particular study, to considerations when deciding on the [heterogeneity or homogeneity of focus group participants](#), to matters of moderating such as the [importance of gaining individual thinking in the group environment](#).



Most of these articles pertain to the in-person mode, where the moderator meets group participants at a local facility to discuss the research topic for 90 minutes to two hours. Alternatively, there are a variety of online solutions for the focus group method. One of the most popular are online asynchronous discussions (sometimes called “bulletin boards”) that take place over two to three or more days. As [discussed in a brief 2018 article](#), there are a number of strengths and limitations to the online asynchronous mode, including the advantages of flexibility, geographic spread of participants, and potential for multi-media input; as well as limitations such as that having to do with the absence of visual cues, managing participant engagement, and conducting the analysis.

As I write this in mid-March 2020, many researchers are scrambling to find ways to re-design their in-person focus group research during the current coronavirus pandemic crisis. In doing so, these researchers are taking a close look at moving from in-person discussions to an online mode that allows for some semblance of in-person groups by way of face-to-face, real-time interaction, i.e., synchronous video conferencing. For some (if not, most) of these researchers, the online face-to-face mode is a new experience and, as such, researchers are uncertain on how to proceed on two key facets of the research design: 1) the online service or platform they should use and 2) best practices when conducting online synchronous group discussions for research purposes.

With respect to the online service or platform, the researcher needs to weigh the scope of the study (e.g., type of participant) as well as the depth and breadth of the discussion guide. While simple interfaces such as those provided by [Zoom](#),

[Webex](#), or [GoToMeeting](#) may offer the video interface, the researcher needs to think about what they may or may not be giving up in terms of the quality of the discussion. For instance, dedicated online qualitative research platforms – such as [itracks](#), [20/20 Research](#), [Civicom](#), [Discuss.io](#), and others – offer features and capabilities designed specifically for the demands of qualitative research. This includes the capacity to go beyond simple video conferencing (e.g., recording, screen sharing, and transcripts) by way of: recruiting participants; providing a community dashboard; aiding in question development; enabling in-discussion participant activity capabilities such as marking up images and creating collages; an observer “back room”; and various analytical functions such as image tagging as well as keyword and sentiment analysis.

In terms of best practices when conducting online synchronous discussions, here are a couple of resources:

[“Considerations for and Lessons Learned from Online, Synchronous Focus Groups”](#) (Forrestal, D’Angelo, and Vogel, 2015)

[“Best Practices for Synchronous Online Focus Groups”](#) (Lobe, 2017)

[Online Moderator Training](#) with Casey Sweet and Jeff Walkowski

Although there are clearly limitations to the online mode in qualitative research (as mentioned earlier), there are also times and extraordinary situations (such as the current pandemic) when it is the best approach. In these times, it is incumbent on the researcher to think carefully about maintaining the integrity of their research as they move to an online face-to-face mode, to reflect on what was lost and gained in this approach, and to be transparent in the reporting of this research.

Forrestal, S. G., D’Angelo, A. V., & Vogel, L. K. (2015). Considerations for and lessons learned from online, synchronous focus groups. *Survey Practice*, 8(2), 1-8.

Lobe, B. (2017). Best Practices for Synchronous Online Focus Groups. In *A New Era in Focus Group Research* (pp. 227-250). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Images captured from: <https://pixabay.com/vectors/monitor-screen-computer-electronics-1143202/> and <https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/cartoon-people?mediatype=illustration&phrase=cartoon%20people&sort=mostpopular>

# Online Group Discussions: Participants' Security & Identity Questions



Every researcher working with human subjects strives to ensure the highest ethical standards. Regardless of whether the research is quantitative or qualitative in nature – or in the field of health, communications, education, psychology, marketing, anthropology, or sociology – researchers care about protecting the confidentiality, anonymity, and basic “rights” (such as privacy and freedom of thought) of the people who agree to be part of their studies. It is with this in mind that, in addition to gaining IRB approval (as required), researchers openly discuss the goals and intended use of their research with participants, as well as asking them to carefully read and agree to the appropriate consent forms.

Online group discussions (focus groups) present a particularly delicate matter. Unlike any other overt form of research – unlike an online survey dominated by closed-end questions, or an online in-depth interview with one person at any moment in time – the online group discussion – with its amalgamation of many people (typically, strangers to each other) responding at length to many open-ended questions over the course of multiple (possibly, many) days – potentially raises important security and identity concerns among participants. Even with a signed consent form, online group participants may still have serious doubts about the containment of their input to the discussion and, hence, their willingness to contribute openly and *honestly* with the other participants. It is the researcher’s responsibility to address these concerns by *proactively* giving direct attention to questions such as:

- Where and for how long will participants’ comments and uploaded material (e.g., images, videos) linger in “data storage”?
- What are the security measures that are in place and who will have access to the research data (i.e., participants’ comments and uploaded material)?
- Who, other than the moderator, will be observing the discussion in the virtual back room?
- How much of a participant’s identity is actually known by the moderator, the observers, and the other participants?

- Will the other participants keep participants' comments confidential, i.e., not share comments made in the discussion with anyone outside the group?
- Will participants be identified with their comments either internally (i.e., via the final report or presentation) or externally (e.g., via text snippets in an online blog or posting a participant's uploaded video on YouTube)?
- What recourse does a participant have if any security or identity violation occurs?

Image captured from: <http://www.moillusions.com/optical-illusion-fingerprints/>



# The Asynchronous Focus Group Method: Participant Participation & Transparency

There is a great deal that is written about transparency in research. It is generally acknowledged that researchers owe it to their research sponsors as well as to the broader research community to divulge the details of their designs and the implementation of their studies. Articles pertaining to transparency have been posted [throughout](#) *Research Design Review*.



The need for transparency in qualitative research is as relevant for designs utilizing off-line modes, such as in-person interviews and focus group discussions, as it is for online research, such as asynchronous focus groups. A transparency detail that is critical for the users of online asynchronous – not-in-real-time – focus group discussions research is the level of participant participation. This may, in fact, be the most important information concerning an asynchronous study that a researcher can provide.

Participation level in asynchronous discussions is particularly important because participation in the online asynchronous mode can be erratic and weak. Nicholas et al. (2010) found that “online focus group participants offered substantially less information than did those in the [in-person] groups” (p. 114) and others have underscored a serious limitation of this mode; that is, “it is very difficult to get subjects with little interest in [the topic] to participate and the moderator has more limited options for energising and motivating the participants” (Murgado-Armenteros et al., 2012, p. 79) and, indeed, researchers have found that “participation in the online focus group dropped steadily” during the discussion period (Deggs et al., 2010, p. 1032).

The integrity and ultimate usefulness of focus group data hinge solidly on the level of participation and engagement among group participants. This is true regardless of mode but it is a particularly critical consideration when conducting asynchronous discussions. Because of this and because transparency is vital to the health of the qualitative research community, focus group researchers employing the online asynchronous method are encouraged to continually monitor, record, and report on the rate and level of participation, e.g., how many and who (in terms of relevant characteristics) of the recruited sample entered into the discussion, how many and who responded to all questions, how thoughtful and in-depth (or not)

were responses, how many and who engaged with the moderator, and how many and who engaged with other participants.

This transparent account of participant participation offers the users of asynchronous focus group research an essential ingredient as they assess the value of the study conducted.

Deggs, D., Grover, K., & Kacirek, K. (2010). Using message boards to conduct online focus groups. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-4/deggs.pdf>

Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Vega-Zamora, M. (2012). Differences between online and face-to-face focus groups, viewed through two approaches. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 7(2), 73–86.

Nicholas, D. B., Lach, L., King, G., Scott, M., Boydell, K., Sawatzky, B., ... Young, N. L. (2010). Contrasting Internet and face-to-face focus groups for children with chronic health conditions : Outcomes and participant experiences. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9(1), 105–122.

Image captured from: <https://uwm.edu/studentinvolvement/student-organizations-2/our-communityinvolvement/>

# The Complexity of Contexts & Truths in the Focus Group Discussion

I find myself often thinking and writing about qualitative research design because, well, there is a lot to think and write about. While there is a multitude of books, articles, experimentation, debates, and forums on the efficacy of various quantitative approaches and techniques, there is very little on applying quality principles to qualitative design. This partially stems from the fact that there are some qualitative researchers who dismiss the idea of design issues, resting their case on the notion that a focus group discussion is simply an informal gathering of people where any “tool” that elicits a response is good and where design principles have no place.

Fortunately, there are researchers who have investigated the design implications of their research. Jocelyn A. Hollander, a sociologist from the University of Oregon, is one such person. Dr. Hollander published an article in the [Journal of Contemporary Ethnography](#) in 2004 titled, [“The Social Contexts of Focus Groups”](#) where she argues that the focus group environment presents a complex interaction of situations that shape the “truths” we hear from participants. She goes on to say that participants do not harbor one single truth to a discussion topic but instead respond with only the truths that develop from the contexts (the complex group environment) the participant finds him/herself in. These contexts can arise from demographics (e.g., the gender, age, and racial makeup of the group), associations (e.g., the relationship of group participants to one another), and conversation (e.g., the person who first responds to a moderator’s question). These within-group contexts create demands on participants that ultimately impact the discussion outcome. According to Dr. Hollander, group participants’ “responses are being shaped by the context, composition, and facilitation of the group” and that participants strategically select “the narratives from amongst the multiple possibilities to fit the perceived demand of the situation.” So the moderator might ask, ‘What truth am I hearing now, or is it a truth at all?’

The impact of contexts and the idea of multiple truths paint the picture of focus group participants as not “uncomplicated information storage facilities” but rather “contradictory mosaics” deserving greater considerations in our qualitative designs and analyses. Dr. Hollander asserts that we need “a more nuanced understanding of the contexts of focus groups” including more emphasis on the composition of our groups and a willingness to include a discussion of group dynamics – e.g., the order in which participants responded, the association of one group member to another – in our written reports. By understanding and analyzing the “interactional forces” of the group situation, we can more clearly appreciate how our participants

are sharing truths, withholding other truths, or manufacturing new truths for our (and their) benefit.

Within the current flood of discussions on techno-centric “innovations” in research design, this may be a good time for researchers to turn their efforts on finding the truth in their designs.

# Building Rapport & Engagement in the Focus Group Method

*The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 150-152).*

The ability to quickly build rapport with focus group participants and then maintain it throughout the discussion session is a necessary skill of all moderators. Regardless of mode (in-person, telephone, or online), focus group moderators must learn how to effectively engage participants to generate accurate and complete information. Rapport



building for the moderator begins even before the start of a group discussion, when he/she welcomes the participants as they arrive at the facility (for an in-person discussion), on the teleconference line (for a telephone focus group), or in the virtual focus group room (for an online discussion), and it continues beyond the introductory remarks during which the moderator acknowledges aspects of the discussion environment that may not be readily apparent (e.g., the presence of observers, the microphone or other device being used to audio record the discussion), states a few ground rules for the session, and allows participants to ask any questions or make comments before the start of the discussion. In the in-person mode, the moderator's rapport building goes beyond what he/she says to participants to make them feel at ease to also include the physical environment. For example, business executives might feel comfortable and willing to talk sitting around a standard conference table; however, in order to build rapport and stimulate engagement among a group of teenagers, the moderator needs to select a site where teens will feel that they can relax and freely discuss the issues. This might be a standard focus group facility with a living or recreation room setup (i.e., a room with couches, bean bags, and rugs on the floor for sitting) or an unconventional location such as someone's home or the city park.

Another aspect of the physical environment in in-person discussions that impacts rapport and consequently the quality of the data gathered is the seating arrangement. For instance, Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend that the moderator position a shy participant directly across from his or her seat in order to "maximize eye contact." Other moderators prefer to keep particularly talkative and potentially domineering participants in seats close to them so that they can use



their proximity to better manage these participants as needed. The “ideal” seating arrangement will vary depending on the physical environment; the number, type, and homogeneity of participants; and topic of discussion (e.g., for a potentially “explosive” topic such as women’s rights, individuals who are particularly active and opinionated on the issues should not sit together where they may form a subgroup or coalition that could end up dominating and skewing the discussion).

A few of the more critical considerations in building rapport to maximize the [credibility](#) of group discussion data include the following:

- Group participants should be **contacted** on behalf of the researcher(s) at least twice after they have agreed to participate in a focus group—once immediately after recruitment to confirm the date and location, and again via telephone the day before the discussion.
- Not unlike the [in-depth interview method](#), a necessary ingredient to building rapport with group participants is the moderator’s ability to show **genuine interest** in the discussion as a whole and with each participant’s contribution to the discussion. Demonstrating this interest involves frequent and relevant follow-up probing questions as well as helping participants engage with each other.
- The moderator should be attuned to any **verbal and nonverbal cues** that signal participants’ level of engagement and, hence, the extent of rapport among the participants. Indeed, “one of the most difficult skills to teach in focus group training is how to ignite an interactive environment where participants engage with the moderator as well as with each other” (see [“Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method”](#)).
- Rapport building is especially difficult in the asynchronous **online mode** because the moderator does not have direct visual or verbal contact with the participants and therefore has less control over the rapport-building process. The online moderator can, however, identify participants who are not logging into the discussion very often or are leaving only short, non-descriptive responses to the moderator’s questions. In these cases, the moderator can send each of these participants a private email to inquire why he or she has not been more active in the discussion and offer to assist with

any difficulties the participant may be having with logging in or otherwise accessing the discussion. The moderator may also choose to call this participant on the telephone in an attempt to establish a more personal connection that may encourage the participant to become more active in the session.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Image captured from: <https://www.centropsicologicopc.es/sabes-lo-que-es-el-rapport/>

# Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method

There is [an article that ran in \*Research Design Review\* back in 2013](#) having to do with the interactions that ensue in focus group discussions. Specifically, this article addresses the idea that participants' interactions have a significant impact on the outcomes of focus group discussions and yet this "facet of the focus group method...is largely ignored in the analysis and reporting of group research." This article goes on to give an example of a way to think about the interaction effect in the focus group method.



Missing from this article is the question of whether – or the extent to which – interactions even exist in the discussions being analyzed. It seems self-evident that a “discussion” would involve two or more people exchanging ideas and thoughts – that is, an interaction. And yet, one of the most difficult skills to teach in focus group training is how to ignite an interactive environment where participants engage with the moderator as well as with each other. Moderators-in-training are coached on various skills and techniques to spur thoughtful discourse in face-to-face\* focus groups and how to create an “engaged discussion environment,” but there remains a certain reticence among trainees to exercise these newly learned tactics.

Instead, many moderators gravitate to an approach best described as a series of one-on-one interviews. The moderator asks a question and then goes around the table asking for a response from each individual. As each group participant completes a response, the moderator simply resets her or his brain and moves on to the next person. In the end, the moderator has fulfilled the job of hearing from each participant but has actually learned very little.

The purpose of a focus group discussion is to bring together similar (in some cases, divergent) types of people (in terms of demographics, psychographics, product/service use, etc.) and learn about each of them related to the subject matter but also about their collective attitudes and opinions that open the door to new

discoveries. It is this interactive journey that the moderator hopes to achieve in a focus group discussion, a journey that takes the moderator to remote and otherwise hidden points of discovery that are only accessible by the exchange and engagement of the participants.

The question has been raised by moderators-in-training if the techniques utilized to stimulate interaction don't in fact serve to slant the discussion, introducing unwanted bias in the outcomes. For instance, if the moderator attempts to fuel an interactive discussion by asking participants to comment on what others have said – “So John, what do you think about David's idea to reduce the price of prescription drugs?” – does this actually push participants into opinions they may not have had otherwise?

Yes, maybe so. But maybe not. Either way, the moderator is learning how ideas and attitudes percolate among people in the target population segment and, importantly, how their ideas and attitudes may or may not shift over the course of the discussion *as a direct result of* the interactive environment. This is important learning. This is learning that does not happen in an in-depth interview. This is the journey that the moderator is seeking and is nurturing throughout the discussion. In the end, it is the reason we conduct focus group discussions in the first place.

\* The skills and techniques required of online discussions are unique from the face-to-face mode.

Image captured from: <https://forrestbrown.co.uk/news/chatbots-look-whos-talking-now/>

# Individual Thinking in the Focus Group Method

Focus group discussions can be an effective method for learning about a range of attitudes and behavior associated with a particular topic. An important strength of



this method is the diversity of perspectives to be gained *as well as* the associated verbal and nonverbal dynamic that ensues among group participants. It is this group interaction that defines the focus group discussion and makes it a valuable qualitative research method. Two earlier articles

in *Research Design Review* – [one from 2018](#) and [another from 2013](#) – discuss group interaction and encourage researchers to hone their skills in fostering participant interaction as well as sharpen their analytical sensibilities of “interactive effects” and the implications of these effects in the interpretations and reporting of the outcomes.

This emphasis on group interaction may leave researchers wondering what, if any, role individual thinking plays in the focus group method. Yet each participant’s thinking about a topic or issue is critical to understanding focus group data. It is, after all, the reason researchers carefully screen and recruit group participants, i.e., to hear about experiences and attitudes that will vary from individual to individual.

This is also why moderators are trained on, not only how to engage participants in an interactive discussion but also, how to “draw out” and hear from each participant, especially the less social or more timid individual. At the end of the day, the moderator’s job is to come away with useful insights pertaining to the research questions that stem from the group interaction *in conjunction with* the moderator’s knowledge of the individual thinking gained from each person in the discussion.

There are two important moments in a focus group (either in-person or online) when the moderator can (and should) capture individual thinking. One of these moments is at the very start of the discussion and the other is at the end of the discussion. In both instances, the moderator asks participants to privately write (or type) their responses to a few questions specific to the subject matter without the influence from other participants’ discussion or comments. It is in this manner that the moderator comes to understand the individual thinking among the participants related to the topic which can then be effectively incorporated into the moderator’s



conduct of the discussion while also adding important new information that might otherwise go undetected.

Image captured from: <https://hingemarketing.com/blog/story/differentiation-strategy-standing-out-among-the-competition>

# Qualitative Best Practice: Maximizing Individual Response

An [earlier post](#) to this blog discussed the idea that qualitative research, namely focus groups, shares many of the research-design issues or concerns associated with quantitative research. This commentary was an excerpt from a working paper titled “[Focus Group Research: A Best Practices Approach](#)” and was intentionally non-specific; opting rather to use the initial post to emphasize that “no less than quantitative, focus group...research merits discussions pertaining to a variety of design components...” and to call on “a robust ongoing industry-wide conversation” regarding best practices. This post (also partly excerpted from the working paper) talks about the important role of individual response in qualitative design.

One of the “design components” shared by quantitative and qualitative (such as focus group) research has to do with the researcher’s sensitivity to the unique contribution each respondent/participant brings to the research process. Quantitative and focus group research schemes are equally interested in individual attitudes and behavior – quantitative methods in a highly-structured, wide-spread sort of way (breadth) and focus groups via a highly-interpersonal approach (depth). In many instances, focus group research individualizes quantitative further by deriving meaning and context to survey data that is often masked by necessary standardization and coding. Like quantitative, focus group research methods respect individuality, knowing that the ability to maximize the quality of individual response contributes greatly to the accuracy and usability of the outcome. Focus group efforts show regard for the individual participant in the carefully crafted recruitment (screening) process, the use of probes, and by enabling a meaningful contribution from each participant in a safe research environment.

This attentiveness to the individual is part and parcel with typically-quantitative constructs such as validity. These constructs are rarely (ever?) uttered in the same breath with qualitative research yet the essential underpinning of these concepts – trustworthiness, quality, dependability – are germane to all research designs. In focus group research, the moderator’s control of question administration (by probing and clarifying questions on the spot to unearth any possible misinterpretations or alternative meanings) assures that the intended question (or necessarily re-worded question) is indeed the question being answered. It is this question-answer validation – enabling the researcher to maximize the quality of individual responses – that powers the critical advantage and ultimate usefulness of focus group research.

So why do so many moderators relinquish one of the key benefits of qualitative research – question-answer validation – by employing group or team-activity techniques? It has never been clear to me what the researcher gains by asking two or more group participants to create a collage or sort a picture deck, or asking an entire focus group to embellish each other’s scribbles in “pass the doodle.” While entertaining, these techniques move away from a concern for the individual and potentially lead to superficial “insights” based on analyses of a team effort full of compromise, acquiescence, or disjointed scribbles.

A best-practices approach to focus group (and all qualitative) design entails an understanding of the impact individual response has to the integrity of the research.

# Can We Reduce Gender Differences in Qualitative Research?

As part of her [dissertation for her PhD at Pennsylvania State University](#) in 2011, Rebekah Young looked at “don’t know” (DK) survey responses, specifically how the incidence of DK responses varies by demographic segments. Looking across 12 nationally-representative datasets, 354 questions, and responses from more than 23,000 respondents, Young determined that, among other things, men were less likely to give a DK response than women.



While Young’s findings are not news (i.e., they are supported by existing literature), her work left me wondering about gender differences in qualitative research. Specifically, whether there is a propensity in men to voice informed answers to a moderator’s questions even when the simpler, more appropriate response should be, “I don’t know.” Likewise, I wonder how often women cave with a DK rejoinder when they actually harbor knowledge or experience that could further insights from the research.

This gets more interesting when you consider the research subject matter because the likelihood of non-response in our qualitative research may depend on the topic of discussion. Men, it turns out, are more likely to voice “don’t know” around “sensitive questions” (e.g., sexual activity) while women are less likely to give a DK response when the discussion topic is “family and friends.” At least in the survey research Young looked at. But do these types of gender differences exist in the qualitative arena as well?

I have plenty of colleagues who argue that mixed-gender focus group discussions never “work” because of the competing dynamics generated from the pure nature of psychological, emotional, and physical male-female differences. Yet I have rarely hesitated to combine men and women in a multi-person qualitative session on a non-sensitive topic. This makes my work more difficult – teasing out what someone *really* thinks, stripped of all possible gender-related sources of error – but it also makes it more real. It is more real because, after all, men and women do live together in some context in the real world, and the gender dynamic is often an

important sight to behold, lending a new dimension to our understanding of the research.

In consumer research, home improvement, do-it-yourself studies are a case in point. Many years ago this was primarily a man's world but women quickly entered this market and, in my experience, have as much if not more to say about selection, purchase, and use of building materials than men. These focus groups are typically very vocal and full of energy, with everyone (both men and women) sparked by their mutual interest in the topic (home improvement). Are men more likely to contribute (less likely to say "don't know") in this traditionally-male topic of discussion while drowning out their female counterparts? This is when the effective skills of a trained moderator come into play.

In the end, and in contrast to survey research, maybe the ability to reduce gender-response differences in the qualitative environment is a challenging but real benefit to our qualitative work.



# Focus Group Research: Thinking About Reasons May Hamper New Insights

A focus group discussion is nothing if not a venue for researchers to probe more deeply on any given issue. Focus groups by definition target a particular topic and envelop group participants with variations of the “why” question – “What makes you say that?” “How are the services of one healthcare provider ‘better’ than those of another?” – as well as any number of projective techniques that shine light on unconscious, less-than-rational motives and perceptions. Moderators spend considerable time devising ways to get at the underlying reasons for people’s behavior and attitudes; and, indeed, these in-depth techniques make qualitative research an invaluable companion to quantitative methods.

Or do they? Do all of our “what,” “how,” “who,” “why” questions and indirect techniques actually elicit attitudes and opinions that are truly valuable in that they offer an honest measure of our participants’ realities? This is an important question because, just as moderators search for the best approach in gaining new insights, they also want to feel confident in their findings.

So, are our focus group designs – with all the built-in probes and tactics – producing good research? The issue here is the trustworthiness of the results and whether what we learn from one focus group study is not too far afield from what we would learn if we were to rewind the calendar and conduct the study again with the same set of participants in the same group environments. Researchers are obligated to examine this issue and the certainty by which they can say that the attitudes expressed (or otherwise revealed) in their focus group research are dependable and the implications drawn from the research are real.

Wouldn’t it be a shock if our direct and indirect moderating techniques were in fact *degrading* the honesty of our focus group research outcomes? Some experimentation has shown that asking people to explain or give reasons for their attitudes and behavior essentially alters their response. Timothy Wilson and Sara Hodge, for example, in [“Attitudes as Temporary Constructions”](#) discuss various studies that all point to the same basic conclusion: introspection or asking research participants to analyze their reasons changes their attitudes, and can even lead to less-than-optimal decision-making behavior (i.e., people allow their reasoning to guide them to decisions they would not make otherwise and that ultimately turn out to be unsatisfactory choices).

Wilson and his colleagues, in [their 1989 paper](#), isolated the effect of introspection and attitude change to people who were relatively unfamiliar with or less

knowledgeable about the topic in question. So, for instance, people who were not too familiar with a political candidate were more apt to change their attitudes toward the candidate compared to people with more knowledge of the individual. It has been suggested that, in analyzing their reasons, less knowledgeable people are forced to consider any number of factors outside their original sphere of belief, making the newly-formed attitude fleeting and subject to further change.

These are just a couple of examples of the work that has been done exploring attitude strength and its association with “thinking too much.” It is important to anyone who designs focus group research because it tells us that: 1) asking group participants to justify their attitudes and behavior (via the “what,” “how,” “who,” “why” questions or projectives), in and of itself, can alter their thoughts; and, 2) the reasoning process – particularly among less knowledgeable participants (possibly non-customers, non-users of a product or service) – invites a host of atypical considerations for any one individual that can fluctuate from moment to moment. All of which speaks to the trustworthiness of our research findings.

If the purpose of research is to understand [how people think](#) then how do we do that without trespassing into the zone of “thinking too much” and affecting the very attitudes we are after? Focus group research designs can address this in various ways. For instance: 1) the moderator can build in more active listening skills that focus on picking up inter- and intra-participant attitudinal inconsistencies; 2) the moderator can carefully select projective techniques and avoid those that force participants to think deeply about something they know little about; and, 3) focus group discussions can be targeted towards people who have knowledge of the topic (e.g., customers, users of a product or service) and therefore more likely to harbor a stable opinion. These are just a few of the many design considerations that researchers can incorporate into their focus group studies to maximize honest reasoning from participants to produce *insightful* and useful outcomes.

# Projective Techniques: Do We Know What They Are Projecting?

A focus group moderator's guide will often include group exercises or facilitation techniques as alternative approaches to direct questioning. While many of these alternative tactics are not unique to the group discussion method, and are also used



in in-depth interview research, they have become a popular device in focus groups, esp., in the marketing research field. These alternative approaches can be broadly categorized as either enabling or projective techniques, the difference being whether the moderator's intent is to simply modify a direct question to make it easier for group participants to express their opinions (enabling techniques) or delve into participants' less conscious, less rational, less socially-acceptable feelings by way of indirect exercises (projective

techniques). Examples of enabling techniques are: sentence completion – e.g., “When I think of my favorite foods, I think of \_\_\_\_.” or “The best thing about the new city transit system is \_\_\_\_.”; word association – e.g., asking prospective college students, “What is the first word you think of when I say, ‘first day of college’?” or asking hospital administrators, “When I say ‘patient care’, what is the first word or words that come to mind?”; and storytelling – e.g., “Tell me a story about the last time you made something for dinner using leftovers.”

Projective techniques serve to move the discussion away from direct questions specific to the research topic and instead ask participants to project their feelings by imagining the thoughts of others, role playing, and describing visual stimuli (such as images). Completing thought bubbles on a cartoon drawing depicting genderless characters, and selecting from a stack of photographs the images that best represent how participants feel about a topic are just two examples of projective techniques.

The use of projective techniques is especially rampant among marketing researchers who increasingly (with the growing capabilities of online research) devise new variations of projective exercises. However, from a quality-design perspective, the use of projective techniques can be problematic and begs the question of whether or how much projective techniques bring added value to the group discussion. While enabling techniques are extensions of direct questioning that fall within the researcher's natural skill set, the indirect method of projective

exercises drifts into the little-known realm, among many social science researchers, of clinical psychology. Regardless of whether focus group participants are given the opportunity to explain their own interpretation of their thought bubble, drawing, or picture sort – or whether the interpretation is left for the researcher – the inherent subjectivity of the meanings that are ultimately associated with participants’ output threatens the validity of these techniques.

The credibility of qualitative research data partially rests on knowing what is being measured, yet the short duration of a focus group session – and the moderator’s limited depth of knowledge about the participants – may make true interpretations of the data (and linkages back to the research objectives) from projective techniques a challenge. What, for example, has the researcher measured from a collage exercise resulting in a collection of seemingly unrelated images from each of 10 group participants? The moderator can investigate each participant’s interpretation of their “artwork” but the reality is that the focus group moderator does not have the capability of knowing whether the collage exercise tapped into an unconscious realization important to the research objectives, or knowing if the exercise measured aspects of the participant related to (for example) motivations, cultural background, or social awareness.

To maximize the credibility of focus group data stemming from the use of enabling and projective techniques, researchers must carefully select which techniques to use based on their ability to interpret the results in conjunction with the in-session time the moderator will be able to give to these exercises. For instance, the researcher might opt for a smaller discussion format, such as dyads and triads, in order to accommodate the necessary time to complete a projective technique, such as a picture sort, including a thorough examination of each participant’s reasons for the photographs he or she selected as well as *those that were rejected*. The careful use of these techniques will not only enhance data credibility but also increase the overall quality of the research by allowing the researcher to perform necessary verification procedures (such as triangulation) in the analysis phase.