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Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research

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Parent: "Because _____." Child: "But why _____?" Several rounds of this often leads the parent to anger: "Stop asking silly questions!" In the same way, Etzioni's persistent questioning of the "whys" behind human behavior and the assumptions of logical thinkers and economists might lead some readers to anger. It is a common fate of children and critical thinkers to "make" people angry. Actually, such angry people make themselves angry.

It is my opinion that Etzioni has written a very special book.

Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research,
by Richard A. Krueger

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The term "focus group" has become a household word in recent years, as researchers study values, attitudes, product preferences, political leanings, and other reactions to a complex society through controlled, guided, small group discussions focused on a particular topic. The current popularity of focus groups in the public and private sectors suggests a recent invention. Yet, focus groups were promulgated as a viable research technique in the classic sociological work, *The Focused Interview* (1956), by Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall.

As a form of qualitative research, the focus group is a good example of a sociological method that has been adopted in the corporate world and in applied settings. The focus group uses standard principles of group dynamics and relies on orthodox principles of research design to achieve legitimacy and validity. Conducting focus groups is an ideal opportunity for sociologists to practice their profession and to make data-driven recommendations for political, social, economic, and consumer change.

As Richard Krueger points out in *Focus Groups*, they are appropriate for gathering in-depth information from past, current, or potential consumers, program participants, voters, organization members, etc. Focus groups tap the subjective world of respondents (their perceived needs, interests, concerns) rather than the objective world of measured behavior. Focus groups can also be used as heuristic devices prior to staging larger-scale quantitative research projects; they can also be used in concert with quantitative methods, or as a way of helping explain findings from a survey or poll. Focus groups enable us to see not only what people think, but how they think.

Uses of the focus group are virtually unlimited. Krueger cites the case of a movie studio "that has received numerous awards and quintupled profits in five years [by using] focus groups to test audience reactions to possible endings for

new films'' (20). He also demonstrates the utility of focus groups in finding out why farmer's sons and daughters chose to attend small colleges instead of the large University of Minnesota campus at Minneapolis. I have used the method to explore how men and women differ in their reactions to different brands of nail clippers and (on a different occasion) mayoral candidates. Focus groups can be used to analyze the needs of a potential client or consumer population, or to find out why a program has failed. In all cases, as Krueger notes, the procedure "allows professionals to see reality from the client's point of view" (21).

The method is relatively cost-effective in that numbers of respondents are small (20 recruited for a group of 8 to 10), respondents journey to a central, local research site, staffing needs are modest (a moderator, administrative assistant, recruiter, transcriber, and report writer—often the moderator fulfills several of these roles), and demands on computer time are negligible (except for report production and graphics). These advantages help to explain the growing popularity of focus groups throughout the country. On the negative side, focus groups suffer from the same flaws as other forms of qualitative research: the small sample size puts generalizability into question; sample selection, however careful, still presents problems of bias; and the complexity and richness of data require special interpretive skills. In addition, a focus group must be led by a professional trained in group dynamics and the mandates of scientific inquiry lest the discussion wander off track or, worse, be biased by an unwitting leader. Failure of recruited members to show up for a session is akin to unreturned questionnaires in survey research (low response rate): one never knows exactly how they might have responded. In a focus group situation, the interplay of ideas among participants can be greatly affected by a dominator who is not controlled by the moderator; similarly, persons who find it difficult to break into a discussion may not express their views unless the moderator is adept at bringing quieter participants into the interaction.

These caveats are woven throughout Krueger's detailed, hands-on guide to contracting for focus groups, moderating them, and reporting the ensuing data. He shares his experiences in taking clients through the process of creating the "research question," translating that into a "questioning route" that expresses a client's central concerns, recruiting a carefully selected sample of participants, moderating the session(s), and preparing a report that is true to the data as well as useful to the client. Some of Krueger's charts and appendices, especially the telephone screening questionnaires and questioning routes, will be of value to the neophyte.

Krueger's emphasis in this book is on non-profit agencies and organizations. He states in the preface that "Focus groups can improve the planning and design of new programs, provide means for evaluating existing programs, and produce insights for developing marketing strategies" (15). He seldom refers to such private sector applications as product testing, evaluation of corporate

services, or the testing of political waters—all of which are common uses of the focus group method. For this reason, the book is limited in its usefulness. Many of the time frames for conducting the groups and preparing reports, for example, would be unacceptable in the private sector. Relationships with clients, fee structures, and the nature of reports also vary according to type of client.

Because Krueger is writing primarily from his own experience, the book is filled with examples from rural and agricultural settings. His suggestions are undoubtedly helpful to a moderator attempting to work with clients and participants of this type, particularly in such nonprofessional settings as bars, restaurants, homes, and hotel rooms. (Although the author insists that care be taken to locate a "neutral" setting, I would argue that a bar is never neutral.) However, for private sector, urban settings in which focus groups are conducted in more sophisticated, controlled facilities, the book falls short. A folksy writing style and too many agricultural extension examples may make it hard for the private sector moderator to relate well to Krueger's explication of strategies for client contact or group facilitation.

Another weakness of this text has to do with methodological purity. After nicely defending the legitimacy of focus groups as a qualitative methodology, Krueger appears to fall into the trap of trying to quantify through the back door: asking participants to stop and rate the importance of several predetermined issues on a "list," rather than asking open-ended questions that allow participants to identify issues important to them. This technique is acceptable for stimulating discussion only after participants have had an opportunity to define for themselves the most salient issues.

Krueger's attention to the construction of interview questions is laudable. However, I question his assertion that questioning routes should include five or six questions, and certainly no more than ten. In my experience, clients are usually looking for feedback on a variety of concerns; ten to fifteen major questions with appropriate probes can effectively guide a group through two hours of intensive discussion. His point is well taken, however, that an inexperienced moderator may carry a heavy arsenal of questions, but little tolerance for pauses or promising sidetracks. Further, Krueger argues that the moderator should memorize the questioning route. While I agree that this would be ideal, if the moderator is dealing with more than four or five very simple questions, there is more danger that the questions will be asked in a biased fashion or in a slightly different way from group to group. (Often the same questions are asked of several groups, each with unique qualities.) I find that 5 by 8 cards held in my lap can be used as prompts and allow me to concentrate wholly on the line of discussion; I can be thinking of spontaneous probes rather than trying to remember the exact wording of the next question. This is, perhaps, best left to the comfort level and style of each moderator as long as questions remain "true."

Krueger's stand toward logistics seems somewhat outdated. He suggests that an assistant moderator should take notes and operate a visible tape recorder (he considers the use of hidden tape recorders unnecessarily secretive). In my opinion, the use of nonintrusive recording devices is standard in focus group research and is far superior and less disruptive than conspicuous note-taking of equipment sitting mid-table. Sociological practice ethics require that participants be notified at the beginning of the session that they are being recorded and/or being observed by clients and research assistants through one-way mirrors (also standard industry practice). If they understand that this is to ensure accuracy of data analysis and that anonymity will be preserved in all cases, participants can relax into a natural and informal discussion of the topic at hand. When specially-designed focus group rooms are not available, tape-recording equipment should be duplicated so that note-taking is not essential.

Finally, the text is annoyingly repetitive—a fault that could be corrected in a later edition. The bibliography, however, which is current and draws from a variety of settings, is both pragmatic and of scholarly interest to sociological practitioners.

It will be interesting to observe in the next decade whether the focus group method will become recognized as more than a fad of the 1980s. It may take its rightful place as a superb example of qualitative sociological methodology that, properly used, can yield valid, reliable, and meaningful social data. Training workshops sponsored by the Sociological Practice Association will play a significant part in the professionalization of focus group methodology.

Integrating Sex and Marital Therapy: A Clinical Guide, edited by Gerald R. Weeks and Larry Hof. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987. 225 + pp.

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"Eclectic approach" is a label frequently used by clinicians and/or academics to refer to their work. Such a claim is often represented by a disjunctive set of ideas and/or actions that are ineffective and ineffective at best, or confusing and counter-productive at worst. Weeks and Hof have produced a text that does not fall victim to the "eclectic flaw." *Integrating Sex and Marital Therapy* is an excellent set of readings which reflect a systemic approach, integrating the multi-dimensionality of sexual problems that couples experience. The book has two major divisions. Part I focuses on conceptualizing sexual problems from a systems perspective; it is subdivided into theoretical issues and practical applications. Part II deals with special problems the clinician might encounter.

The issues to be considered in evaluating the marital relationships of clients