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Colleagues within the College of Education at the University of Minnesota continue to provide encouragement and advice. Special thanks to professors Jean King, Gary Leske, Edgar Persons, and Roland Peterson and to the scores of graduate students who are willing to learn and apply concepts.

I am indebted to colleagues with the Cooperative Extension Service who were willing to try out the ideas and suggest refinements to the procedures described in this book. Through field application I have had the opportunity to learn from many individuals. Thanks to Pat Borich and Gail Skinner with the Minnesota Cooperative Extension Service, Greg Hutchins from Alburn University, and Tom Archer from Ohio State University.

My wife Sue believed from the start that this book would get finished and helped arrange a home life that would allow for uninterrupted writing. In addition, she provided encouragement, advice, and support to complete the manuscript.

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PART I

Groups and Focus Groups

First Exposure to a Focus Group

Betty was relaxing at home after a hectic day at the office. She had just finished reading Section A of today's newspaper and was reaching for Section B when the telephone rang. She answered, expecting a call from her brother George.

"Hello."

"Good evening," the voice on the phone responded. "I'm conducting a survey of people in the community, and I would like to ask you a few questions. It will only take a couple minutes. Is it OK to begin?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Do you have any houseplants in your home?" the caller asked.

"Yes," Betty answered.

"How many do you have? Would you say that you have less than 5 plants, 5 to 10 plants, or more than 10 plants?" the voice inquired.

"More than 10."

"In the past year, have you used any fertilizer or plant growth chemicals on your plants?"

"Yes, I have," she responded.

"Our company, which is Research Incorporated, is conducting a study of houseplant fertilizer. We would like to invite you to a special meeting to discuss fertilizer products. There will be no selling involved, and if you decide to attend we will provide you with a year's supply of plant fertilizer. The meeting will be held on January 12 from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. It will be at the Hanover Motel in Minneapolis. Would you be able to join us?"

"Sure, count me in," she replied.

"Great. Now let me get your name and address . . ."

It all happened rather quickly, and after the call Betty began to wonder what it was all about. "A year's supply of fertilizer is great, but what's the catch? They said no selling was involved, but why would they want to hold a meeting to discuss fertilizer on houseplants? Oh well, I guess I'll just have to wait and find out."

Does this phone call sound familiar? The call was a telephone screening questionnaire for a focus group. Betty passed through the screens for selection and accepted the invitation to talk about houseplant fertilizer. If she didn't have houseplants or use fertilizer she would have received a polite "Thank you, we have no further questions," and the call would have ended.

Later, after the meeting, Betty's brother George asked her about the experience. She reflected: "The meeting was interesting, in fact enjoyable. There were about 10 people there, including a person who asked questions. The people all had houseplants and talked about different types of fertilizer. The discussion leader asked questions about fertilizer and was interested in the reasons we selected various brands, and what we liked about different types of fertilizer. At the end of the session, she told us the information would be used by the Northern Fertilizer Company to improve their product. Before I left she offered me either two gallons of liquid houseplant fertilizer or a five pound bag of dry fertilizer. I took the liquid. Do you want some?"

Betty experienced a focus group interview. It is one of the most popular tools in market research today. A growing number of people have participated in focus groups. Interestingly, however, many participants in Betty's group didn't know that the group discussion was a focus group interview or that the telephone survey was a screen for focus group participation. Rarely is the term *focus group* used at the

group discussion, because the term might inhibit the spontaneity of participants. Also the term *focus group* is rarely used when invitations are made to potential participants. Instead, participants are invited to "discuss" or "share ideas with others," thereby conveying the informal nature of the discussion.

Focus groups are being used increasingly by researchers to discover preferences for new or existing products. The focus group discussion is particularly effective in providing information about *why* people think or feel the way they do.

The Quest for Information

Focus groups have been a mainstay in private sector marketing research. More recently, public sector organizations are beginning to discover the potential of this procedure. Educational and nonprofit organizations have traditionally used face-to-face interviews and questionnaires to get information. Unfortunately, these popular techniques are sometimes inadequate in meeting information needs of decision makers. The focus group is unique from these other procedures; it allows for group interaction and greater insight into why certain opinions are held. Focus groups can improve the planning and design of new programs, provide means of evaluating existing programs, and produce insights for developing marketing strategies. This book is intended to provide assistance in using focus groups to obtain information that will be helpful to decision makers.

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Groups

Groups are a common experience. It would be difficult to find a human being who has not been in a group; indeed most of us are repeatedly confronted with a plethora of groups. We find ourselves invited, herded, or seduced into groups for planning, decision making, advising, brainstorming, support, and a host of other purposes.

It's not surprising that we think twice at the prospect of getting together in a group. Groups can be fun, exciting, or invigorating, but they can also be agonizing, time-consuming experiences that are both unproductive and unnecessary. In some organizational environments the group (task force, committee, etc.) is created because individuals are confused as to a future course of action. More often than not the pooled confusion results not in enlightenment but only more confusion. As a consequence, the group becomes our scapegoat—we blame the group for the inadequacies of the individuals in the group. The group is neither good nor bad but merely a reflection of our human capabilities. The group magnifies our individual wisdom and shortcomings. Our shortcomings are often the result of confusion about the purpose and process of the group.

Sometimes the purpose of the group is clearly understood, such as in a nominating committee where the end result is a slate of officer candidates. Other times the purpose of the group is vaguely understood, perceived differently by participants, or changes over time. We tend to engage in group experiences without careful thought or clarity of

purpose. At times the function of the group may be to suggest ideas, to clarify potential options, to recommend a course of action, or to make a decision—each function considerably different from the others. Researchers regularly find themselves working with groups for purposes of planning or evaluating. Difficulties emerge when there is ambiguity around these endeavors. Lack of clarity in defining the group purpose can result in confusion, frustration, misunderstandings, wasted time, and—most likely—the wrong outcomes.

The second type of confusion relates to the group process. Group leaders may not have the necessary skills to guide the group process. Effective leadership is essential if the group is to accomplish its purpose. The group leader must not only be in tune with the purpose of the group but also have the necessary skills to effectively guide the group process. Furthermore, the skills necessary for one type of group experience do not necessarily transfer into other group settings.

The Focus Group: A Special Type of Group

The focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. A focus group is typically composed of 7 to 10 participants who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. Furthermore, the focus group is repeated several times with different people. Typically, a focus group study will consist of a minimum of three focus groups but could involve as many as several dozen groups.

The researcher creates a permissive environment in the focus group that nurtures different perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote, plan, or reach consensus. The group discussion is conducted several times with similar types of participants to identify trends and patterns in perceptions. Careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provide clues and insights as to how a product, service, or opportunity is perceived.

In summary, a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. It is conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion.

The Story Behind Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were born out of necessity. In the late 1930s, social scientists began investigating the value of nondirective individual interviewing as an improved source of information. They had doubts about the accuracy of traditional information gathering methods, specifically the excessive influence of the interviewer and the limitations of predetermined, close-ended questions. The traditional individual interview, which used a predetermined questionnaire with close-ended response choices, had a major disadvantage: The respondent was limited by the choices offered and therefore the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer by oversight or omission. In contrast, nondirective procedures began with limited assumptions and placed considerable emphasis on getting in tune with the reality of the interviewee. Nondirective interviews use open-ended questions and allow individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. The open-ended approaches allow the subject ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes as opposed to the structured and directive interview that is lead by the interviewer. Stuart A. Rice was one of the first social scientists to express concern. In 1931 he wrote:

A defect of the interview for the purposes of fact-finding in scientific research, then, is that the questioner takes the lead. That is, the subject plays a more or less passive role. Information or points of view of the highest value may not be disclosed because the direction given the interview by the questioner leads away from them. In short, data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitudes of the subject interviewed. (p. 561)

As a result, social scientists began considering strategies in which the researcher would take on a less directive and dominating role and the respondent would be able to comment on the areas deemed by that respondent to be most important. In effect, the emphasis of nondirective interviewing was to shift attention from the interviewer to the respondent.

Nondirective interviewing had particular appeal to social scientists and psychologists in the late 1930s and 1940s. Roethlisberger and Dickson (1938) cited it in studies of employee motivation and Carl Rogers (1942) in psychotherapy. During World War II, increased attention was placed on focused interviewing in groups, primarily as a means of increasing military morale. Many of the procedures that have come

to be accepted as common practice in focus group interviews were set forth in the classic work by Robert Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia Kendall, *The Focused Interview* (1990/1956).

In the past 30 years most applications of focus group interviewing have been in market research. Those who develop or manufacture new products know the importance of advertising their products and are also well aware of the financial risks of introducing new products. Gone are the days when emphasis was placed on super salespeople who could sell anything. The sensible strategy is to stay in touch with the people. Focus group interviews have considerable value because they enable the producers, manufacturers, and sellers to understand the thinking of consumers.

Most recently, focus group interviews have been regarded by many as a crucial step in shaping marketing strategies for products. Coe and MacLachlan (1980) found that focus groups were the most popular technique for evaluating potential television commercials among the 37 largest users of television advertising. Some products have undergone major revisions in manufacturing, packaging, or advertising because of findings in focus groups. Advertising campaigns often focus on what the consumer considers to be the positive attributes of the product. For example, soft drink companies discovered via focus groups that consumers drink beverages not because of thirst but because of the sociability features associated with the product. It is no wonder then that slogans promoting these beverages highlight how "things go better" or increase personal popularity on the beach (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstrucker, 1976).

Focus group interviews are widely accepted within marketing research because they produce believable results at a reasonable cost. This technique is growing in popularity among other information seekers, such as social scientists, evaluators, planners, and educators. It is a particularly appropriate procedure to use when the goal is to explain how people regard an experience, idea, or event.

Social scientists have rediscovered the focus group. Merton's pioneering work has lain dormant in the social sciences for decades. The evolution of focus groups, and for that matter of qualitative research methods in general, has been delayed for a variety of reasons—a preoccupation with quantitative procedures, assumptions about the nature of reality, and a societal tendency to believe in numbers. For several decades the pendulum of evaluation research swung to the quantitative side with primary attention to experimental designs, con-

trol groups, and randomization. This sojourn with numbers has been beneficial in that we have gained in our experimental sophistication, but it also nurtured a desire for more understanding of the human experience. Too often quantitative approaches were based on assumptions about people, about things, or about reality in general that were not warranted.

The process of evaluating social programs is maturing, in part because of an environment that expects relevance, practicality, and utility. Increasingly, human service programs are requested to be more accountable for the resources they consume. Those directing educational, medical, and social programs are being asked to document what they are doing and the impact of their efforts on people. Failure to take accountability seriously can have deleterious consequences on future funding. As a result, public and private providers of services are increasingly interested in knowing more about how their clients (customers) view their programs. Strategic planning, needs assessment, and program evaluation are critical activities for human service professionals who want to improve programs and services. Focus groups can provide them information about perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of program clients. The procedure allows professionals to see reality from the client's point of view.

For example, the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture was concerned about its declining enrollment of rural youth. High school graduates from small rural Minnesota schools were enrolling in agricultural colleges in neighboring states. A series of focus groups with potential students revealed that the young people had some negative notions about the university, and, in fact, the university was unwittingly adding to their perceptions. Students from small rural high schools saw the University of Minnesota as too big and too impersonal. They felt that they would get lost in the thousands of students at the university and therefore they preferred smaller schools. With this insight the faculty in the division of agricultural education took another look at the promotional materials being distributed to prospective students. The descriptive brochures had numerous pictures of the university—pictures of the campus mall with thousands of students and pictures showing the grandeur of the university. The brochures told of the millions of books in the library, the thousands of students in the university, and the scores and scores of departments and majors. Clearly, the existing promotional materials reinforced the fears of potential students. As a result of focus group research, faculty members designed a special brochure that

emphasized the "more compact" St. Paul campus, "friendly teachers who take an interest in you," and the benefits of attending college with other students from rural communities (Casey, Leske, & Krueger, 1987).

It is dangerous for a university, or for any public service agency, to take the customer for granted. Periodically, effort is needed to get in touch with the customer and see the agency, program, service, or institution from the perspective of the client. Patricia Labaw, in her text on survey design (1985), argues that the day of "seat-of-the-pants decision making" has ended. She writes:

Whether we choose to recognize it or not, our society is basically marketing oriented. None of our institutions exists indefinitely on public sufferance; each must perform. Each must respond to need. As a consequence every policymaker must know what the need is and try to learn the best way of providing the service or product to meet the need. The days of seat-of-the-pants decision making are passing, if they have not indeed already passed. (p. 17)

A similar view is expressed by Daniel Katz, Barbara Gutek, Robert Kahn, and Eugenia Barton in *Bureaucratic Encounters* (1975). They argue:

In private enterprise under competitive conditions, there is some direct feedback from the appropriate public when people exercise their discretionary power as consumers to purchase from one or another competing source. In private monopolies and public agencies, there is no such direct check on products or services. In such cases the need for systematic feedback from the people being served is all the more necessary. (p. 2)

Administrators of nonprofit institutions are taking their cues from the private sector and discovering that marketing the product is essential. Although some institutions are able to survive on their historic reputation, other nonprofit organizations are concerned about maintaining or increasing their audience and meeting client needs in the most efficient manner possible.

Why Do Focus Groups Work?

The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services, or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people. We

are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us. A deficiency of mail and telephone surveys and even face-to-face interviews is that those methods assume that individuals really do know how they feel. A further assumption is that individuals form opinions in isolation. Both of these assumptions have presented problems for researchers. People may need to listen to opinions of others before they form their own personal viewpoints. Although some opinions may be developed quickly and held with absolute certainty, other opinions are malleable and dynamic. Evidence from focus group interviews suggests that people do influence each other with their comments, and in the course of a discussion the opinions of an individual might shift. The focus group analyst can thereby discover more about how that shift occurred and the nature of the influencing factors. An excellent discussion is presented by Terrance L. Albrecht (1993) and her colleagues in the chapter "Understanding Communication Processes in Focus Groups."

Often the questions asked in a focused interview are deceptively simple. They are the kinds of questions an individual could answer in a couple of minutes. When questions are asked in a group environment and nourished by skillful probing, the results are candid portraits of customer perceptions. The permissive group environment gives individuals license to divulge emotions that often do not emerge in other forms of questioning. Indeed, one of the hazards in getting information from people is that they often want to tell us how they wish to be seen as opposed to how they are.

The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. For some individuals self-disclosure comes easily—it is natural and comfortable. But for others it is difficult or uncomfortable and requires trust, effort, and courage. Children have a natural tendency to disclose things about themselves but through socialization they learn the values of dissemblance. Over time, the natural and spontaneous disclosures of children are modified by social pressure. Sidney Jourard (1964) expands on this tendency:

As children we are, and we act, our real selves. We say what we think, we scream for what we want, we tell what we did. These spontaneous disclosures meet variable consequences—some disclosures are ignored, some rewarded, and some punished. Doubtless in accordance with the laws of reinforcement, we learn early to withhold certain disclosures because of the painful consequences to which they lead. We are punished in our society, not only for what we actually do, but also for what we think, feel, or want. Very soon, then, the growing child learns to display a highly expurgated version of his self to

others. I have coined the term "public self" to refer to the concept of oneself which one wants others to believe. (p. 10)

A familiar story, especially for mothers, is that of a child running home to tell of an exciting and possibly a dangerous experience. Mom is horrified at the tale and tells the child to never, never do that again. Mom's unexpected response leaves an indelible impression and the child learns one of two things: Either never repeat the experience, or if you do, don't tell Mom!

A young mother was visiting the Sunday school class of her 6-year-old daughter. The lesson was on proper behavior in church. The teacher asked the children to name places where we should not run. Lots of hands were raised and the teacher called on the children one at a time. The children offered their answers: school, the library, grocery store—but church was not mentioned. The visiting mother proudly noticed that her daughter's hand was still waving in the air, undoubtedly armed with the answer sought by the teacher. Finally the teacher called on the daughter. With great enthusiasm the 6-year-old responded: "The liquor store—my dad said that I should never run in the liquor store because I'll knock down the bottles." The mother was momentarily stunned as liquor stores were held in disrepute by this church. The child had not yet developed a "public self," at least as far as the church was concerned.

Throughout life, human beings form ideas or concepts of how they want to portray themselves. These concepts may be conditioned by the family, social networks, social or religious organizations, or employment. People tend to be selective about what they disclose about themselves. Jourard suggests:

Our disclosures reflect, not our spontaneous feelings, thoughts and wishes, but rather pretended experience which will avoid punishment and win unearned approval. We say that we feel things we do not feel. We say that we did things we did not do. We say that we believe things we do not believe. (p. 11)

Jourard contends that this pattern of selective disclosure, or pseudo self-disclosure, leads to self-alienation where "the individual loses his soul, literally" (p. 11). People have a greater tendency for self-disclosure when the environment is permissive and nonjudgmental. In some circumstances people will reveal more of themselves. An experience that has occurred to a number of people is in long-distance travel—particularly by bus or plane. In these experiences, people are seated in

close proximity to strangers over a period of time. It is not unusual for travelers to strike up a casual conversation where they share information about themselves. In some circumstances, the travelers begin to reveal information—rather personal attitudes and feelings about work, family, or life that they might not share with acquaintances. This self-disclosure occurs for several reasons: One or both of the travelers may have sensed that they were alike; the environment is nonthreatening; and even if one disapproved of what was heard, the travelers will likely never see each other again. Linda Austin, a psychiatrist at the Medical University of South Carolina, was interviewed by Julie Schmit (1993) in *USA Today*:

If you reveal something about yourself to a stranger, so what? There are no consequences. Once you get off the plane, the relationship, which can become very deep very quick, is over. (p. 1B)

Effort is made to produce this permissive environment in focus groups. This is achieved through selection of participants, the nature of the questioning, and the establishment of focus group rules. The focus group is often composed of strangers or, on occasion, it will consist of people who are acquainted but have minimal contact with each other. The interviewer is not in a position of power or influence and, in fact, encourages comments of all types—both positive and negative. The interviewer is careful not to make judgments about the responses and to control body language that might communicate approval or disapproval. At the beginning of the discussion the interviewer purposefully sanctions and even encourages alternative explanations. For example: "There are no right or wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. We are just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful."

Another reason why the traveling partners readily disclose is that they perceive that they are alike in some ways. It may be that they have one or more characteristics in common, such as age, sex, occupation, marital status, or hold similar attitudes on a topic of discussion. Jourard (1964) found that individuals are selective in their self-disclosure and the decision to reveal is based on perceptions of the other person. In his studies of self-disclosure Jourard found that "subjects tended to disclose more about themselves to people who resembled them in various ways than to people who differ from them" (p. 15).

Focus groups are best conducted with participants who are similar to each other, and this homogeneity is reinforced in the introduction to the group discussion. The rule for selecting focus group participants is commonality, not diversity. Care must be exercised to be alert to subtle distinctions that are not apparent to the researcher, such as social status, educational level, occupational status, income, and the like. For example, one cannot assume that all clerical workers, all hospital workers, or all farmers consider themselves to be like each other. Within each category there are distinctions that may seem subtle to the researcher but are major differences to those who are in those situations. The danger is that people tend to be hesitant to share and will defer their opinions to someone else in the group who is perceived to be more knowledgeable, wealthy, or influential. For example, a college graduate (or heaven forbid, a Ph.D.) in a group of high school graduates, even if they have similar job responsibilities, can affect the extent of sharing. Farmers place considerable status on the number of acres they own. Regularly, farmers who own fewer acres will defer to a farmer with greater acreage. In part, this may be an unwarranted assumption that acreage, prosperity, education, or income equals knowledge and more valued opinions. In a focus group, the interviewer underscores the commonality of the group in the following manner: "We have invited people with similar experiences to share their perceptions and ideas on this topic. You were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to us."

Summary

As a society we have a predisposition to form groups and engage in collective interactions. This tendency may well be part of a common human experience that is not bounded by cultures or time. In spite of our millennia of experience and cumulative wisdom about groups, we still struggle along regularly confused about both the purpose and process of such interactions. Focus group interviews involve people and from outward appearances the technique resembles experiences that are familiar to all of us. Below this surface, however, there are a number of elements that are unique from other group experiences. The focus group interview is created to accomplish a specific purpose through a defined process. The purpose is to obtain information of a qualitative

nature from a predetermined and limited number of people. Focus groups provide an environment in which disclosures are encouraged and nurtured, but it falls to the interviewer to bring focus to those disclosures through open-ended questions within a permissive environment. Chapter 2 provides a close-up look at this environment.