

Writeup of Morgan and Krueger (1993)

Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, R. A. (1993). When to use focus groups and why. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 3-19). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Summary

Morgan and Krueger (1993) discussed myths about focus groups and when they should be used or not be used. They started by noting that marketers, evaluation researchers, and academic researchers all use focus groups, but for different reasons. Discussing common myths about focus groups, Morgan and Krueger noted that

- they are rarely as cheap or quick as they appear on first glance;
- while the moderator needs appropriate skills in working with groups, their knowledge of the population and of the research area are equally important;
- they may consist of co-workers and acquaintances, although careful design and moderation are needed to solve issues that may occur in such groups;
- sensitive topics may be discussed—if the atmosphere is safe—but may need to be “pull[ed] back from ... [if] oversensitive information” is disclosed (p. 7);
- their goal should not be to produce conformity, but instead to elicit “participants’ experiences and feelings on a given topic” (p. 7);
- they are not automatically a naturalistic method, depending on the design and setting;
- they can be used to help make decisions if “monetary resources are scarce” (p. 8); and
- do not *have* to “be backed up by other methods,” although this will help (p. 9).

According to Morgan and Krueger, focus groups should not be used when

- “the primary [focus] is [on] something other than” a research problem (p. 11);
- individual interviews would be more appropriate than social, group discussions;
- the participants are not a good match for the topic of discussion, because they are not involved enough, are “over-involve[d],” or the researcher asks inappropriate questions that will not “contribute to the overall goals” (p. 13); or
- statistical, quantitative data on categories of participants is required or requested.

Focus groups are “a particularly desirable research method” (p. 15) for situations when

- participants “historically had limited power and influence” and can be empowered through a focus group discussion (p. 15);
- it is necessary to expose groups to each other and bridge gaps between them;
- “complex behavior and motivations” (p. 16) are being studied, since focus groups allow people to identify with each other and thus express their motivations better;
- the “goal is to learn more about the range of opinions or experiences” (p. 17); and
- a personal, “friendly ... [and] respectful” research method is required (p. 18).

Morgan and Krueger concluded by noting there is not “one right way to apply focus groups” and recommend they be used in cases where they will provide a “good enough answer ... that is preferable to an inept application of a technically superior method” (p. 19).

Analysis

The strength of Morgan and Krueger’s chapter is in its overall organization. Broken down into three overall sections—myths about, reasons *not* to use, and reasons *to* use focus groups—the chapter is especially easy to follow and understand, especially since each myth or reason gets a separate subheading. Sometimes those subheadings do not clearly state the actual myth or reason; however, as Morgan and Krueger stated having “a handy table or diagram” that summarized everything said in their 17 pages would “give a misleading impression of the clarity and specificity of our decisions about which research methods to use” (p. 19). The summary above even runs a little foul of this, although I feel it provides sufficient context and interpretation to provide a correct impression of Morgan and Krueger’s chapter. Their chapter does not serve as an introduction to focus group research, and readers are clearly expected to have at least basic familiarity with the method (as would be picked up in a general research methods course). As a useful and easy-to-follow reading that helps researchers understand focus groups, when they should and should not be used, and some of the problems that might occur with using them, I would highly recommend Morgan and Krueger’s chapter to other current and future qualitative researchers.

Keywords: focus groups, myths, reasons, moderators, design, sensitivity, experiences, feelings, naturalistic, setting, social, empowerment, bridge gaps, behavior, motivations, identify with, opinions, experiences, personal, friendly, respect

Writeup of Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther (1993)

Albrecht, T. L., Johnson, G. M., & Walther, J. B. (1993). Understanding communication processes in focus groups. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 51-64). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Summary

Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther (1993), communication researchers, discussed the role of communication processes in focus groups, focusing on the dynamics of interactions in said groups. They defined communication as “a transactional, symbolic process of mutual influence occurring between two or more individuals that alters their affective, cognitive, or behavioral states” (p. 52), and discussed the communication process in terms approaching a hermeneutic approach, focusing on its ongoing, dynamic, cyclical creation of meaning and understanding; focus groups placed this process in the context of “discussions ... among six to eight participants” intended to elicit information and opinions on researcher-defined topics (p. 53). They noted these opinions tend to be more “isomorphi[c] ... to those of ... the [broader] population” than those generated from individual interviews, since opinions form not just from individuals’ information seeking but also from their social interaction (p. 54). However, focus groups can present problems if these opinions are caused by “compliance” with the questioner—or with other participants, i.e. groupthink—or by “identification” with the questioner or other participants, resulting in an answer that is not one’s own but is instead what one thinks someone else wants to hear (p. 55). This is particularly common when “various hierarchical levels within a single organization” are involved in a focus group (p. 56). To facilitate the offering of “internalized ... deeply ingrained and personal” opinions (p. 56), Albrecht and his colleagues recommended adapting techniques from the nominal group technique (NGT) or the Delphi method: having participants write responses first and then read them back, or have them write responses and then have the facilitator read them back or post them for reading by participants. They drew another useful technique to encourage the telling of creative, socially constructed ‘stories’ from the theoretical and practical work of Bormann, who termed this method “fantasy theme analysis” (p. 59): a (usually) fictional scenario that develops from a common theme that the participants share. Albrecht et al. used the example of George H. W. Bush as a central theme that could be used to spark a discussion (in 1992-3) of how to solve the country’s economic woes amongst Democrats. “Sharing fantasies” based on such a theme would aid in the construction of

“mutually understood and shared social realities” (p. 61). Albrecht and his colleagues stated further recommendations in their conclusion, stating (a) “the role of the moderator [must] be given critical consideration” (p. 62); (b) “communication patterns ... may be useful for obtaining [both] quantitative ... [and] qualitative information” (p. 62); numerous communication-based “threats to the validity of focus group data exist,” relating to “desirability ... trust ... bias ... and deception” (p. 63); and (d) “differences” in samples “have implications for language choices, cultural ways of speaking ... and disclosure levels” in focus groups (p. 64).

Analysis

Unlike Morgan and Krueger’s chapter in the same volume, Albrecht et al.’s chapter was not as well organized and easy-to-follow. In particular they bounce back and forth between communication theory and practical recommendations. I focused on the latter in my reading and subsequent summary of their points, although their drawing on theory is certainly commendable and helps the persuasiveness of their arguments. Their suggestions for drawing from NGT, Delphi, and Bormann’s “fantasy theme analysis” also appear to be very useful approaches for conducting focus groups that result in valid, accurate, and usable research data about a given problem. I wish they had provided a little more discussion of their concluding recommendations; while some follow from their earlier presentation (threats to validity) or from the discussions of Morgan and Krueger (the role of the moderator), others either have little direct evidence to back them up (sampling concerns) or go against the advice of Morgan and Krueger (using focus groups for statistical, quantitative data). The authors also echo Morgan and Krueger’s suggestion that focus groups can be used for decision making, although—at least in my view—focus a little too strongly on the idea of some degree of group consensus. On a more philosophical and epistemological level, while they take somewhat of a hermeneutical and social constructivist approach to the communication process they consider communication itself in more cognitive terms similar to Belkin’s ASK model in LIS. While I think it would be better if they had used a definition of communication more in line with the social constructivist bent taken in most of their chapter, it did not affect their overall analysis much. I would recommend their chapter—especially given its relatively short length—as a helpful reading for anyone interested in learning more about or conducting a focus group for a research project or evaluation.

Keywords: focus groups, communication, communication process, interactions, cyclical, meaning, understanding, advantages, problems, compliance, groupthink, identification, nominal

group technique (NGT), Delphi method, fantasy theme analysis, moderator, quantitative, qualitative, threats to validity

Writeup of Nielsen (1997)

Nielsen, J. (1997, January). The use and misuse of focus groups. *IEEE Software*, 14(1), 94-95.

Summary

In this brief article, Nielsen (1997) discussed when and how focus groups should and should not be used in software / Web interface design. He defined focus groups in such a context as “bring[ing] together six to nine users to discuss issues and concerns about the features of a user interface ... typically last[ing] about two hours and ... run by a moderator” (p. 94). Nielsen noted that focus groups “only assess what customers *say* they do ... not how they actually do it” (p. 94). They are “a rather poor [standalone] method for evaluating interface usability,” since no matter how much users may like or favor a particular interface on looks, “if users can’t use it”—as determined through usability tests with individuals—it doesn’t matter (p. 94). Users participating in a focus group usually only watch a demonstration, and may say a particular behavior or model makes sense to them, but when tested do not fully understand it or prefer a different behavior or model; Nielsen provided scrolling vs. windowing as an example (p. 94). He argued that focus groups *can* be used—and used well—“to discover what users want from the system ... their thoughts and preferences,” a different kettle of fish than assessing practical usability (p. 95). He recommended sessions that appear “free-flowing and relatively unstructured” to participants, but that actually are following a script and are kept “on track without inhibiting the flow of ideas and comments” (p. 95). More than one focus group would improve the representativeness of the results; the use of actual system prototypes and concrete scenarios for interface use would also improve the accuracy of the data gathered. Finally, Nielsen noted a form of informal focus group could be run through online, asynchronous communication—“e-mail, web sites, or Usenet newsgroups” (p. 95)—but that it would suffer from a lack of confidentiality and potentially biased populations.

Analysis

Nielsen’s article did not add a great deal of additional information that was not already raised in the chapters by Morgan and Krueger (1993) and Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther (1993). The vast majority of his recommendations simply echoed these and other readings; for example, his comments on focus groups only assessing what people say they will do, and not what they actually will do, were very similar to Jordan and Dalal’s (2006) comments on the need for ethnographic research in corporate settings. The additional stressing of these

recommendations is helpful, but perhaps not entirely necessary; there is also no real conclusion to the article. Despite these issues, the shortness of his article does make me inclined to suggest it as a quick and easy reading for researchers who are working on or with a system and want to use focus groups in an evaluation study, but I am not sure it would be the best recommendation for a more general population of qualitative researchers or researchers-to-be, despite the short length. It would best serve those whose research interests are in HCI / usability, CSCW, information systems, and/or information architecture, and I would recommend it primarily in those cases; researchers who are dead-set on using focus groups would also find it at least somewhat useful, although even there I think Morgan, Albrecht, and their colleagues provide more reasoned and considered suggestions backed up by the literature.

Keywords: focus groups, interface design, HCI, Web design, usability, problems, advantages, thoughts, preferences, free-flowing, representativeness, accuracy, informal focus groups, confidentiality, bias