

Counseling for Business & Industrial

Focus Group

7.1 History

The technique is linked to the name of two sociologists: Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948). Focus group are first mentioned in an article by Merton published in 1946 in „*American Journal of Sociology*”, but only in the 1970s did focus group investigations begin to be used on an ever larger large scale. The starting point of this type of investigation seems nevertheless to go back in time and is related on the one hand to the development of unstructured in-depth interview techniques, especially in anthropology, and on the other to group dynamics research.

Focus group in career counseling is a *qualitative method*, a sort of *interview* to “produce obtain” a certain kind of information. It is an exploration technique, reuniting a small number of persons guided by a moderator who has the role to facilitate the discussion. The moderator uses a group interview guide in order to keep the discussion focused, and the participants speak freely and spontaneously about a series of themes that are or interest to them, previously announced.

The method of focus group has the following characteristics: *focalization* (e.g.: in marketing the research is focused on people’s reactions to a certain advertisement campaign, in social sciences it can be a behavioral scenario, an event, a concept, etc.); the simultaneous use of several *respondents* to generate information; focus on an external *stimulus*; relatively *phased* (by a moderator); these characteristics differentiate focus group from other group interviews.

Why and when is the method useful? There is a wide range of situations where the use of method is recommended, such as:

- for a *deeper understanding* and a *larger perspective* on an issue;
- *data collection* (not used for testing hypotheses), in addition to other methods; it is not used to solve particular problems, but it targets data gathering and the analysis of group influence;
- *making one aware of one’s own perspective* – when faced with active disagreement and challenged, people analyze their points of view more intensely than during an individual interview.

The information yielded by a focus group can be grouped into two categories, that are inter-correlated:

- a) *information on group processes* (how people interact and communicate, both at an intra-personal level: thoughts, feelings, attitudes and values of an individual, and within the group), and
- b) *information on the content* around which group processes are organized (the central stimulus / concept and the related aspects).

Focus group is used in the most diverse contexts. We present below some fields where focus group have been of use:

- 1) marketing and advertising;
- 2) politics;
- 3) community assessment;
- 4) institutional assessment;
- 5) mass-media analysis;
- 6) group analysis;
- 7) career counseling, etc.

7.2 Interview Presentation

The first step towards putting a focus group together is setting up an interview guide adapted to the topic broached. In view of compiling the guide it is necessary to define the thematic horizon of the problem (the topic around which the meeting will gravitate), establish items to be used (questions asked in order to obtain the needed information); developing the main and auxiliary packages (fundamental questions and secondary ones that can come up as consequence of the first batch). Phrasing the questions represents another essential aspect of the method. These must be:

- 1) short,
- 2) clear,
- 3) supportive of the significance decoding effort,
- 4) without negation,
- 5) expressed in ordinary words,
- 6) lacking in emotionally or value-charged words or
- 7) phrases that might induce an answer,
- 8) devoid of moral issues,
- 9) devoid of judgment of the participants.

The order of the questions may take after:

- *the funnel technique*: from particular to general questions and principles;
- *the reversed funnel technique*: from general to particular.

As regards the question types, they can be classified according to several criteria. Kahn and Cannell (1968) put questions in two categories: primary questions (introductory, open, “ice-breakers”) and secondary (targeting the topic, specific, and aiming for in-depth information). Wheatley (1989) identifies a large number of questions to be used in a focus group:

- a) direct research questions: on the topic and derived from the research objectives;
- b) in-depth questions (directed to an issue): target deeper knowledge of attitudes and opinions expresses: “Why ...?”;
- c) test questions: aim to test the extent of the concepts used;
- d) warm-up or redirecting questions: prepare a certain topic or bring participants back to the central issues; “depersonalized” questions;
 - 1) factual questions;
 - 2) regard certain reality aspects directly, and expect answers referring to facts;
 - 3) “affective” questions: meant to bring out an affective state, feelings of respondents; they stimulate information generation, but are also very risky (may generate unpredictable reactions);
 - 4) anonymous questions: the opinions on a certain topic are written down on paper by each subject;
- e) silence: as a way of obtaining information.

Throughout the focus group, a moderator must exercise extreme skill in the asking of questions and avoid those that do not bring additional knowledge or may have the following negative effects:

- a) the purpose of the meeting is not reached;
- b) participants focus on answering questions and not on their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes as regards the respective topic;
- c) participants get bored; they answer the questions but are noticeably detached from what is going on;
- d) the frustration of the moderator increases as he/she fails to obtain the qualitative information expected;
- e) the client feels his/her needs will not be satisfied;
- f) qualitative research will look bad both to the participants and to the client.

In order to form a group of participants, we have several recruitment methods:

- ◆ *institutionalized* – recruitment is done by mediation of institutions or organizations; through *field agents* in order to select respondents from the environment they work in; *invitations sent by mail*. It is to be mentioned that rewards (material, psychological) are used irrespective of the recruitment method used.

A controversy that occurs in the stage of creating a focus group is whether screening is necessary during the recruitment process. There are arguments for both variants, ideal being to adapt the strategy to the objectives of the focus group and the variables in the process.

Pro screening arguments: differences between the cultural and informational level and/or lifestyle of the participants may inhibit the flow of conversation; the principle of reactivity: getting participants familiar with the topic through control procedures, and joining a focus group with prejudice and beliefs that render more valid information.

Argument against screening: same background of group members leads to a flat and unproductive discussion (sharing must be enhanced only by a few common characteristics, such as social and economic class, profession).

7.3 Typologies

Aside from making a good focus interview guide, another essential aspect is the choice of the participants. Focus group samples can be formed by taking into account several *typologies*.

Below, a series of typologies (Bulai, 2000) most frequently encountered in practice.

- 1) *3X3 System*. This system is based on coupling maximum 3 variables, each with maximum three categories. The most often used variables are: age, gender, education, marital status, residence. The system is applied to professional samples, in order to make conclusions more consistent, but also heterogeneous, so as to support the communication and information seeking process. Such a typology is useful when a certain social and professional category is being focused on, wishing to seize the “internal differences” within the category.

- 2) *Perfectly homogeneous samples*. Samples of this kind are only used when participants should be perfectly compatible, in order to obtain a maximum of information. It is used in groups and categories with various problems (social integration, marginal groups, minority groups), in general, in categories with difficulties to communicate in public or practice self-segregation.
- 3) *Gender structured samples*. The issue of compatibility between the moderator and the group is often raised. For highly efficient communication, the moderator should be of the same gender as the group members. Such sampling is met in family studies or sociology of education.
- 4) *Conflicted samples*. In such samples the members come from very different categories (at least two active members from each). The categories must be polarized (preferably only two). This sampling promotes argumentation and highlights communication barriers and blockages.
- 5) *Expert samples*. Especially used in those investigations where information and knowledge of highly qualified individuals are the purpose of the research.
- 6) *Children and young people samples*. In this case the parents' permission is necessary (for children). Attractive materials are recommended (boards, drawings, photographs, role-play, hypothetical situations), so that all children or young persons should feel at home and relaxed in the group. The moderator must have very good verbal and non-verbal skills.
- 7) *Parent samples*. The members of one or more families who are concerned with a common issue form the group. The moderation of such groups is difficult especially with strongly traditional families who centre power in a single person. In order to avoid such problems, open, fun moderating is needed, by avoiding to dwell on problems or conflicts. Role-play based on inverting one's family status may be extremely useful and insightful.

The sample must reflect those population segments that can furnish pertinent information regarding the topic under discussion; for this reason, no random sampling will be necessary because it is not intended to make broad generalizations. In exchange there are a series of other questions raised when

constructing the sample that cannot receive a standard answer and depend on the context. We present a series of such problems below (Bulai, 2000):

1) *Homogeneity versus heterogeneity*

a. Homogeneous samples:

- i. used when we wish to harmonize relations between subjects,
- ii. allow a deeper level of communication between group members,
- iii. allow the study of the “minimal difference”
- iv. those differences of opinions and attitudes that characterize the members of homogeneous groups.

b. Heterogeneous samples:

- i. do not allow the same compatibility in communication,
- ii. favors polarization effects,
- iii. may evince communication blockages or barriers between various social categories, value and opinion incompatibilities,
- iv. are important in understanding social mechanisms.

2) *Group amplitude*. For heterogeneous groups where the discrepancy in status is vertical, amplitude reflects heterogeneity, which is the distance between the highest and lowest status. Discussion groups with high amplitude have the following characteristics:

- a. always require a special communication regime, with high blockage for inferior status members, and special behaviour from high status members;
- b. performance is poor, for that particular conflicts can develop, and is difficult to moderate.

3) *Pre-existence of group structure*. It is recommendable for focus group to use samples where subjects do not know each other. Nevertheless, samples where all subjects know each other are preferable to those where only part of the members knows each other. In case the respondents are acquainted, the following negative effects may arise:

- a. private communication channels are quickly created, parallel to the group's, the group becomes unbalanced since subjects who are not known by the pre-existing members will be excluded from discussions;
- b. the group may be divided into two different structures;
- c. a leader may very likely appear and the leader's opinions and attitudes will be expressed.

4) *Conflictual groups and harmonious groups*. The climate in the focus group makes the difference. Certainly, conflicts may exist in homogeneous groups as well. It is nevertheless considered that conflictual groups stimulate discussion, but the issues are control and danger of blockage. These types of conflictual groups lead to two kinds of result:

- a. respondents become more critical and state their position more sharply, without attempting to make their opinions desirable and attitudes moral;
- b. reactive mechanisms are revealed.

A desirable sampling model consists of focus group divided into *homogeneous but contrasting subgroups*, defined in terms of “*breaking characteristics*” (Krueger, 1994). For example, a sample may be made up of women divided according to role (one *characteristic*), and social and economic status (a second characteristic). There must however be a limit to the number of *breaking characteristics*, a small one is ideal. It is recommended that sampling be made in view of all variables apparent in each case, as well as the objectives of the research.

The location is extremely important for information validity and investigation efficiency. This can be: a certain institutional location, the place where the participants carry out their activity, or neutral. There is no generally valid recipe for an optimal focus group location.

As regards the *duration* of a focus group there are diverse opinions. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) consider an hour to be minimum, whereas the maximum to be several hours, while others appreciate 30-45 minutes as minimal, and an hour and a half as maximum. Usually, standards are for 1-2 hours with adults and maximum one hour with children. Sometimes a focus group can last up to one day or half a day. In practice, the discussion is stopped the moment answer quality and respondents involvement go under a certain limit.

A focus group may be carried out in different *styles*, moderators can make recourse to several *strategies* (Bulai, 2000):

- choosing between being fun or being distant from the very beginning, sinceafter adopting a style it is difficult to switch;
- forcing the first answers;
- provoking conflict and polarization;
- calming down disputes;

- alleviating the morality effect (depersonalization and defactualization of the situation);
- stimulating and inhibiting certain categories of people;
- empathy (in delicate, intimate, highly personal instances);
- “the devil’s advocate” and aggressiveness;
- neutral (equidistant treatment of the problem, neutral language).

Since the moderator is an important actor in a focus group, we will refer to some of his/her characteristics. Greenbraum (1999) classifies moderating styles according to two criteria: degree of control over the process, and degree of control over the content.

7.4 Segments

- *Segment I.* Standardized exchange, peculiar to highly structured interviews, faceto-face (individual).
- *Segment II.* Beneficial to “expert” relationships (e.g.: doctor-patient; teacherpupil).
- *Segment III.* The moderator facilitates the most appropriate process for the focus group. The control over the content is minimal, but the aspect on which the discussion is to be centred is set beforehand.
- *Segment IV.* Characteristic for a self-managed group. Disadvantages: possible disputes that can threaten the relationship between the participants, complete absence of thematic standardization.

Not anyone can be a good focus group moderator. There is a *moderator profile* with the main characteristics (Surdu, 2003):

- I. *Professional competence:* being aware of methodology and interview techniques, skilled in working with and leading small groups, know the field, and be sensitive to the topic under discussion.
- II. *Communication skills:*
 - a. efficient active listening;
 - b. analysis of non-verbal communication;
 - c. negotiation;
 - d. guiding discussion in a subtle and non-obstructive manner;
 - e. self-revealing;
 - f. open (empathy, but objectivity and detachment);
 - g. enhancing the process (“incomplete understanding” mimicry, but not ignorance);

- h. expressivity of feelings and emotions;
 - i. communication management;
 - j. conflict management;
 - k. questions aiming to assess the mental or emotional state of the respondents;
 - l. using in questions (“How did that make you feel...? What did you think...?”).
- III. *Personality traits*: extrovert, dynamic, communicative, active, strong, sense of humour, narrative qualities, empathy, emotional expressivity, spontaneity, being aware of one’s perception errors, etc.

7.5 Functionality of Group Counseling

The moderator has also a very important role in handling difficult persons in the focus group. In these cases, there are active techniques to block the tendency of some to pose as experts and present their opinions as facts. A rule can be adopted that any categorical opinion should be explained to the group and we thus use the group to handle such opinions. Quiet members must be encouraged to speak, and talkative members may be tempered.

Function of a series of variables (moderator, means, characters involved) we have several types of focus group.

- a) *Two Way Focus group* consists of two groups where an interactive one analyses the other and discusses the interaction observed, on the basis of which conclusions will be drawn. This will be analyzed distinctly (“Focus group to focus group”).
- b) *Focus group with two convergent moderators* has one moderator who ensures the efficient unfolding of the meeting (seizes non-verbal reactions, encourages the free flow of ideas, etc.), while the other is concerned with staying close to the pre-established pattern.
- c) *Focus group with two divergent moderators* is a qualitative research where the two intentionally differ in their opinions, so as to encourage respondents to choose one side of the demonstration or the other. Implicitly they will motivate their choices, and thus the number of non-answers will be reduced significantly.

In addition, half the pressure on the group will dissipate if respondents are more concerned with expressing their opinions and choosing sides than with what the group thinks of their opinions. They will know that whatever the side, at least one other person agrees with them and they will therefore not hesitate to express their opinion as freely as possible.

- d) *Focus group with respondent moderators* is a group where one or more respondents are asked to play the part of moderator for a while. The disadvantages are that it can only be applied in societies open to such an exercise. Only extremely communicative, assertive and uninhibited people can take part in a focus group that becomes a real game both for respondents and the moderator (who will silently observe and intervene only when needed).
- e) *Client Focus group* is characterized by the presence of one or more representatives of the organizational client(s). This type of research is characteristic for sociologists and psychologists.
- f) *Mini Focus group* has only 4 or 5 participants instead of 8-12, as with the traditional focus group. The answers will be fewer, but more concentrated and unitary. The disadvantage is that the cost is similar to that of a traditional focus group, and the information poorer.
- g) *Teleconference and Online Focus group* is based on modern means of communication. Both *Teleconference*, and *Online* are qualitative research, used when respondents cannot be replaced by other members of the population (their opinions being extremely important), or when respondents previously selected are far from each other and cannot meet under any circumstances. For a focus group to take place properly, a good moderator and a certain number of participants are not enough. Support means:
- h) *Observers*. Their role is to observe the participants and note down their statements or gesture on throughout the focus.
- i) *Audio and/or video recording means*. All the movements and words of the participants are recorded both video and audio. The actual work only begins after the end of the focus group; the analysis is difficult and lengthy. Tapes are viewed several times over, and the contents of the participants' words especially analyzed, without forgetting however their facial expression,

gestures, and mimic. Solid knowledge of psychology, as well as much experience is needed to decant the information obtained in this kind of focus group.

- j) *Unidirectional windows*. So as not to perturb the focus group, unidirectional windows can be used; thus, the participants will not feel incommode and will be able to act naturally.
- k) *Processing, analysis and interpretation of the information* resulting from the focus group is an extremely important stage. The better structured and coherent has the procedure been so far, the easier the analysis and interpretation. An aspect that should not be overlooked is using a *system of pair focus group*, which requires holding at least two focus groups, with the same sample and interview guide. This fact will contribute to obtaining more clear and eloquent information on the issues considered.

7.6 The Perspective of Analyzing & Interpreting Focus Groups

There are several perspectives of analyzing and interpreting the data in the focus group. One version is *data cropping* (Bulai, 2000):

- I. ***Thematic cropping***: identifying the topics debated that are not identical with the ones proposed by the researcher in the guide.
- II. ***Hypothesis cropping***: rearranging the material function of the relevance of the respective data to the research hypotheses.
- III. ***Participant category cropping***: the data is grouped according to a certain category of representative subjects.

Another interpretation technique is *content analysis* (Janis, 1953); the analysis can be:

- a) ***pragmatic***: it requires regrouping the data function of possible causes or effects induced by the particular use of a sign (word, topic, attribute), it is used when only *signs* (particular significance in the text) are classified;
- b) ***semantic***: it requires classifying signs according to the content / significance; the signs may need:
- c) ***frequency analysis***: the number of instances of a concept / name / institution is counted,
- d) ***attribute analysis***: the frequency of attributes or characterizations is sought and analyzed,

- e) **assessment analysis:** targets the way reference subjects (people, institutions, events) take on particular attributes;
- f) **sign-related:** the use of certain words, irrespective of their significance, is looked into, and only the use of a certain key word is recorded, usually with connotations in the emotional register that can give an insight with respect to the inner state of the respondents.

The analysis of information obtained from the focus group must also centre on **observation and assessment of the participants** by certain criteria, such as: attitude pro or against the matter; degree of interest for the topic; level of competence with regard to the problem; focusing on an emotional or rational style; analysis of the manifest and latent content of answers; analysis of the interactions between group members.

Target population Participants:

- **young people (girls and/or boys)** in the process of choosing / developing a professional career. By constructing groups of girls only, boys only, or mixed (in various proportions), different group dynamics can be obtained, diverse opinions and therefore different results;
- **young people and parents** presenting in public their concerns and opinions regarding the professional future of their children;
- **counselors** who wish to debate a professional issue.

The optimal size of the group is between 6 and 8 people, with extreme limits between 5 and 12. The choice of a larger or a smaller group depends on the objectives set: in a larger group more ideas are generated, but it is more difficult to control and can fragment into smaller groups, while a smaller group is easier to organize, the information is more easily recorded, but there is a risk that it will yield less information.

The persons included in a focus group must be as close as possible from a social and professional point of view so as to entertain open communication; age is also an important factor, in the way that big age differences between the group members can negatively influence on the communication inside the group.