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Focus Groups, Program Evaluation, and the Poor

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Focus groups are a qualitative research technique which can be applied to program evaluation with low income clients. Focus groups are relatively easy to organize and operate, can be less expensive than other research techniques, can provide quick feedback, and possess the potential to empower low income clients.

This paper discusses the development of focus groups, their strengths and weaknesses, and their utility in program evaluation. An example of their use in the evaluation of a state low income energy program is provided along with some guidelines for their use with low income respondents.

Introduction

This paper describes the use of focus groups with low income clients in program evaluation. "The focus group technique is a tool for studying ideas in a group context. The technique has the potential to assist policy making and policy-driven research...(Morgan, 1988, p. 5)."

Historically, focus groups have been used in industry to make decisions on marketing. Focus groups also have been employed in politics to assess deeply held attitudes and preferences of voters. More recently, focus groups have been used "...by academic researchers, by government policy makers, and business decision makers. Focus groups provide a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and impressions.... They represent a remarkably flexible research tool...(Stewart, et. al., 1990, p. 140)."

With the increased use of qualitative methods in social science research, there is a growing appreciation of focus groups as a legitimate research technique. As part of this trend, there

is greater reliance on focus groups in social welfare research, especially in program evaluation.

Focus Groups

Like individual interviews and participant observation, focus groups are a form of qualitative research. Focus groups are basically group interviews.

Focus groups had their beginnings in sociology and in psychiatry. Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld were the first to use focus groups, or what they called focussed interviews, at Columbia University in 1941. Merton and his colleagues used focus groups initially to analyze the effectiveness of war time propaganda efforts and then to analyze the effectiveness of Army training films. A paper (Merton & Kendall, 1946) and then a book (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956) on the focus group technique resulted from these early studies. Paul Lazarfeld and others pioneered the use of focus groups in marketing research (Morgan, 1988, p. 11).

"The legacy of psychologists and psychiatrists in the development of this technique was their commitment to the pursuit of unconscious motivation and their application of probing techniques to expose those motives without altering them (Goldman, McDonald, 1987, p. 3)." Bellenger, et. al. agree. They stress the similarity between focus groups and group therapy sessions. "This technique... allows the researcher to handle sensitive areas more effectively via the group method than with individual interviews (Bellenger, et. al., 1976)."

Focus groups are special types of groups in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. Focus groups are generally composed of eight to twelve individuals who do not know each other. The focus group members are selected because they have similar experiences which can be studied in order to understand some phenomenon. The intent of the focus group to is promote self disclosure among the participants about an issue, value, opinion, or experience (Krueger, 1988, p. 18).

The moderator or group leader should be trained and have experience in interviewing and in group dynamics. The moderator may be more or less directive, depending on the purpose of

the research and the characteristics of the group. The moderator attempts to keep the discussion on the topic without inhibiting the expression of ideas and opinions by group members (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, pp. 10–11). A skilled moderator is crucial to the success of the focus group as a research technique.

As the name implies, focus groups usually progress from general content to more specific subjects. They "focus in" on areas that are of major concern to the researcher.

In an important book, Krippendorf (1980) refers to the distinction between *emic* and *etic* data. Data which is in its natural form, with little imposition by the researcher or the research setting, is called *emic* data. *Etic* data is data which responds to the researcher's imposed view of the situation. Focus groups and unstructured individual interviews collect *emic* data. Surveys and structured interviews represent *etic* data.

While surveys of large numbers of people are a quantitative method to study the breadth of attitudes and attributes, focus groups offer a mechanism for in depth analysis. Surveys provide the ability to predict from a random sample to a larger universe, and are amenable to statistical manipulation. Finally, surveys tend to be more expensive than focus groups.

A recent study by McNeely (1990), using a national survey, compared the results of a content analysis of the open ended comments on the questionnaire with the results of a statistical analysis of the closed end questions. McNeely concluded that in this study of job satisfaction, analysis of written comments was a better "barometer," and that "forcing respondents' replies into the structured explanators of closed-ended questionnaires simply may not tell all (p. 136)."

In contrast to the individual interview, the focus group can lead to relatively spontaneous responses from participants because of the stimulus of group interaction. According to David Morgan, "one advantage of group interviewing is that the participants' interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants points of view (Morgan, 1988, p. 18)."

When well conducted, with articulate participants, the focus group also can effect a relatively high degree of respondent

involvement. (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstucker, 1976). With the exception of Fern (1982, 1983), many researchers feel that focus groups can produce more and better ideas than do individual interviews.

A final benefit of focus groups is that they provide quick results. Several groups can be conducted and analyzed in a week by a skilled moderator. Administrators and workers can observe focus groups from behind one way windows or on videotape, and thus gain immediate feedback about their program (Wells, 1974).

Focus groups have several serious disadvantages. Because of their subjective nature, focus groups are vulnerable to bias and selective reporting. Specific difficulties with focus groups include:

—the moderator may not be fully trained, experienced and unbiased. It is relatively easy for an inexperienced or biased moderator to influence the direction of the focus group discussion and selectively report conclusions in a final report. Even competent moderators may have difficulty with running and analyzing the comments of specific groups.

—focus groups may not be representative of the total population since group members are not randomly selected.

—the technique is based on the interaction in the group and groups can vary to a considerable degree. Group interaction may emphasize the views of some participants over others. The personality types of focus group members can influence the group process (Quiriconi & Dorgan, 1985).

—inefficiencies can occur during arranging for an appropriate site to conduct the focus group session and while recruiting group members. In addition, during the focus group session, discussion can be diverted to irrelevant subjects (Krueger, 1988).

There are contradictory findings in marketing studies dealing with the validity of focus group results. Based on a review of some of the literature and his professional experience as director of a private research firm, William Yoell, questions the validity of focus groups (Yoell, 1974). On the other hand, Fred Reynolds and Deborah Johnson report on a comparison of focus group results with the findings of a national survey. They found that 97 per cent of the findings of the two studies were consistent

when focus groups were used to indicate the direction of change in consumer habits (Reynolds & Johnson, 1978).

Researchers are beginning to develop a theoretical base and associated empirical studies to better understand focus group behavior. Group dynamics, or the understanding of the behavior of groups and of the interactions among group participants, provide one important theoretical foundation.

Stewart and Shamdasani feel that the functioning of focus groups is influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental factors. Demographic, physical and personality characteristics, the social power of different groups members, and the degree of group cohesiveness affect focus group behavior and results (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990, pp. 33–49).

However, focus groups are a special type of group because they meet only once. When applying group theory to focus groups, researchers and moderators must consider the theoretical implications of their single meeting.

Program Evaluation and Focus Groups

Program evaluation is characteristic of applied social science. The purpose of program evaluation is to determine whether a specific social program is effective, efficiently organized and delivered, and/or supported by clients and community leaders. Program evaluation can use quantitative and/or qualitative techniques. Program evaluation can take the form of a process evaluation, a needs assessment, an outcome evaluation, a cost benefit study, or any combination of these approaches (Prosavac & Carey, 1989).

For almost 50 years, focus groups have been used by industry to evaluate public reaction to services and products. As Greenbaum writes, "throughout industry, focus groups are being used more than any other research technique as a method of providing research input into a wide variety of subjects" (Greenbaum, 1988, p. 19). Business has used focus groups for " . . . diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program, service or product (and) generating impressions of products, programs, (and) services . . . (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15)."

In social welfare, focus groups are being used more in program planning and program evaluation. In some cases, focus groups are replacing individual exit interviews with specific clients and follow-up surveys by mail or by telephone.

"The distinguishing characteristic of the focussed interview is that interviewees have been exposed to concrete situations, the 'objective' character of which is known to, and has been previously analyzed by, the interviewer (Payne, 1951)." According to this criteria, focus group interviews are appropriate in program evaluation.

In program evaluation, focus groups have several advantages over other techniques for evaluating client perceptions and opinions. Focus groups can deal with complicated social programs. Social service interventions are often individualized. Different approaches are used based on client needs. In an alcohol treatment program or a job training program, for example, clients can have different experiences and different workers based on their presenting problems and needs. Because it is somewhat unstructured, the focus group technique is useful in these situations. Clients can respond to the similarities and differences among different approaches and workers within one program.

Focus groups can get under the surface to expose true feelings. Researchers know that respondents often answer questionnaires and interviews according to what they perceive is the expected answer. For example, respondents tend to answer "yes" to a question such as "Did this program help you?" Focus groups allow the careful researcher to explore the question in more depth and to use the group to create a thoughtful and critical atmosphere. Focus groups can give the researcher a detailed description of how a program is affecting an individual.

The author conducted two focus groups for a program evaluation of a pilot state low income energy program.[1] Focus groups had been used by other researchers to study low income energy programs (Brown & Baumgartner, 1985; Wisconsin Electric Power Company & Wisconsin Natural Gas Company, 1990).

All focus group members had participated in an experimental State program to help low income residents pay their total energy bills (heating and other energy). The pilot programs

used federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) monies and were conducted in an urban and rural Wisconsin communities.

The pilot low income energy program was sponsored by the State of Wisconsin, a leader in the low income energy field. It was operated through local Public Welfare Departments. Energy providers participated as part of the program on a daily basis. A unique aspect of the program was the use of private, community based social service agencies to assist with intake, client advocacy, and follow up (Magill, 1989b).

Money to help pay a portion of a client's energy costs was provided to clients based on their income, household size, and history of energy use. Both regulated utilities- the gas and electric companies- and non-regulated energy providers such as LP gas and wood providers, participated in the program.

From the client's point of view, the pilot energy program was complicated. Different clients worked with different energy providers, public welfare caseworkers, and private social agencies. Further, there were important changes in the benefit formula after the first year.

The purpose of the focus groups was to determine how clients felt about the program, what changes they would recommend, and whether clients practiced energy savings techniques. It was anticipated that clients would find the program hard to understand and that the main criticism would be that the grants to individuals and families were not large enough.

The two focus groups were composed of eighteen females and one male. Most participants were middle aged. One fifth of the participants were older than fifty. Half had not graduated from high school. Forty three percent had some college or technical education beyond high school. Half of the participants were African American. One quarter were white, and one quarter were Hispanic.

Three quarters of the respondents were single or separated and they had a total of 21 children. Over half of the participants had received AFDC during the past year.

The moderator worked from a carefully predeveloped set of five questions. Traditional group work techniques were very useful in conducting the sessions. An effort was made to help

everyone feel comfortable and to express his or her feelings about the topic. The focus groups were conducted informally, and participants were encouraged to speak and identify problems with the energy program. There was good participation. As could be expected, some participants concentrated on personal problems they had with the program. These problems were noted and dealt with after the focus group session.

There was agreement among participants in both groups on the major issues. However, there were some differences between those who primarily used natural gas as a principal fuel and others who used electricity or LP Gas.

The energy program was viewed very positively by the respondents. Contrary to expectations, clients felt that the energy grants were adequate. A woman seemed to summarize the good feelings of both groups when she said "It is a very good program. It helps my household."

As was expected, clients were confused by the program. They did not understand why their individual grant was different from their grant of the year before and from their friends' and neighbors' grants.

Both groups reported examples of rude treatment of customers by utilities. This criticism was not anticipated when the focus groups were planned.

Participants in both cities valued the relationship they had with specific social agencies. They felt that these agencies would assist them in an emergency and gave several examples of the help that specific workers had provided in energy related areas and with other problems. Support for the social agencies probably was influenced by the fact that the agencies helped in selecting the focus group participants.

The results of the two focus groups indicated support for the pilot state low income energy program. The disturbing treatment of clients by some utilities was communicated to a member of the State Public Service Commission who complained to the President of a major public utility. The utility consulted with the focus group moderator about how the utility could better serve its poor clients. In addition, the utility instituted periodic focus groups to monitor low income customer satisfaction.

The results of the focus group evaluation of the pilot low income energy program were reported to state officials, energy utility personnel, and social agency employees. The results were used in planning the next year's State Energy Program (Magill, 1989a).

Program evaluation is often shaped by the interaction between what is appropriate and what is politically possible. "Evaluation . . . is an endeavor which is partly social, partly political, and only partly technical (Herman, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987, p. 11.)." Questions such as, "What is the purpose of the evaluation?" "What resources are available to conduct the evaluation?" and "What political and/or social constraints are placed on the evaluation?" all affect the data collection method(s) to be used. Focus groups are especially vulnerable to bias. As Bellenger and his associates write, "focus group interviews are easy to set up, difficult to moderate, and difficult to interpret, and are therefore very easily misused (Bellenger, *et. al.* 1976, 27)."

Workers, agency executives, funding bodies, clients, and the broader community can have strong interests in the results of a particular program evaluation. The knowledge of conflicting interests can place pressure on a researcher using only a qualitative research tool such as focus groups.

Because there are potential problems with validity and reliability in the use of this technique, several focus group should be conducted as a part of a program evaluation. Focus groups also should be used in combination with quantitative techniques, either to develop a more structured questionnaire or to supplement a questionnaire. Focus groups also can be part of a larger research effort to "triangulate" different methods of collecting data about the same program (Morgan, 1988, p. 25).

Focus Groups and The Poor

Focus groups, with their emphasis on personal interaction within a group, can be effective with low income people. Many urban low income individuals have experience in their home and neighborhood in groups. For many, privacy is a luxury of the middle and upper classes.

An advantage of focus groups is that they are flexible, and provide the moderator with the ability to move the discussion to the appropriate level of generality. Some social services clients think of programs in terms of their own personal problems and experiences with specific social workers. A moderator can help a group to interpret individual experiences and concerns on a program level in order to develop insights about social program operation.

The case example demonstrated that focus groups with low income respondents can be a mechanism for clients to participate in social change. Support from other group members can empower low income clients to express critical views of authorities and of established programs or institutions. Focus group program evaluation with low income persons can become a form of advocacy research (see, for example, Freire, 1970 and Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).

While focus groups can provide a vehicle for low income clients to change social programs, the result is dependent upon their concerns being communicated to the proper authorities. Focus groups do not replace the need for appropriate advocacy and community organization activities.

Conclusion

As a research tool, focus groups offer the great advantage of an unstructured format. The experience of focus group leaders is that the results can be unpredictable and that groups often produce significant and unanticipated results.

Many social workers have experience working with groups. They should be able to adapt these groups techniques to program evaluation purposes.

Focus groups may appeal to social agency administrators, who are feeling increasing pressure to demonstrate through research the effectiveness of their agency's programs. Focus groups are attractive because they are quick and relatively inexpensive. Focus groups have been used extensively in business, and are easily explained to board members and community leaders.

Still, focus groups are vulnerable to manipulation and bias. Focus groups can be selected so that they are primarily composed of supportive clients. The format of the focus group, and the interpretation of the results, can be easily slanted to favor a questionable social program.

At the very least, several focus groups should be conducted to evaluate a specific program. If possible, this technique should be used in conjunction with quantitative research methods, in order to increase reliability and validity.

Focus groups are an interesting qualitative research technique. They are being used increasingly in program planning and program evaluation. As in any research, the final outcome will be based on the skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher.

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Notes