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Friends or Strangers? A Feasibility Study of an Innovative Focus Group Methodology

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Abstract

Focus groups are useful tools for examining perceptions, feelings, and suggestions about topics, products, or issues. Typically, focus groups are held in formal facilities with “strangers” or participants who do not know each other. Recent work suggests that “friendship groups” may provide an innovative alternative for collecting group-level qualitative data. This approach involves recruiting a single “source participant” who hosts a group in his/her home and recruits friends possessing the characteristics desired for the study. In order to examine the feasibility of friendship groups as a defensible research methodology, we conducted a series of four friendship groups as a feasibility study. Our analysis examined data from questionnaires about demographics, levels of acquaintanceship, and experience taking part in the group; transcripts; observational data; and the time and costs for recruiting. Using these data, we examined group dynamics, implementation issues, and recruitment time and costs. Based on these analyses, our study determined that friendship groups have the potential to be a viable and cost-effective method of qualitative inquiry.

Keywords

Focus Groups, Qualitative Research Methodology, Friendship Groups, Recruitment

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Friends or Strangers? A Feasibility Study of an Innovative Focus Group Methodology

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Focus groups are useful tools for examining perceptions, feelings, and suggestions about topics, products, or issues. Typically, focus groups are held in formal facilities with “strangers” or participants who do not know each other. Recent work suggests that “friendship groups” may provide an innovative alternative for collecting group-level qualitative data. This approach involves recruiting a single “source participant” who hosts a group in his/her home and recruits friends possessing the characteristics desired for the study. In order to examine the feasibility of friendship groups as a defensible research methodology, we conducted a series of four friendship groups as a feasibility study. Our analysis examined data from questionnaires about demographics, levels of acquaintanceship, and experience taking part in the group; transcripts; observational data; and the time and costs for recruiting. Using these data, we examined group dynamics, implementation issues, and recruitment time and costs. Based on these analyses, our study determined that friendship groups have the potential to be a viable and cost-effective method of qualitative inquiry. Keywords: Focus Groups, Qualitative Research Methodology, Friendship Groups, Recruitment

Introduction

Focus groups are an excellent technique to capture users’ perceptions, feelings, and suggestions about a topic, product, or issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Ritchie, Lewis, McNoughton-Nicoholls, & Ormston, 2014). These groups typically consist of a small number of participants who are guided through a discussion by a moderator using a structured interview protocol. Moderators are trained to obtain input from all participants, which provides a breadth of information that can help guide the next steps in the research process (e.g., developing a questionnaire, designing health communication materials). Moreover, the focus groups often consist of strangers. Researchers have argued that familiarity tends to inhibit disclosure and that previously established relationships could influence the discussion and group dynamics in ways that negatively impact the results (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Smith, 1972; Templeton, 1994). However, participants typically share a common set of characteristics determined by the purpose of the research study (e.g., social media users, cancer survivors, breastfeeding mothers). Recruiters typically employ purposive sampling to target respondents with these desired characteristics, often seeking demographic diversity within those constraints. Focus groups are usually held in formal facilities, which offer a controlled data collection environment. While focus groups are a well-established methodology for collecting qualitative data, the process of recruiting participants and securing suitable focus group facilities can be expensive and time-consuming.

Recently, a new methodology, called “friendship groups” or “friendship cells,” has emerged in the market research area (Motivate Design, 2015). In this approach, researchers recruit a single “source participant” who in turn recruits friends or acquaintances possessing the characteristics desired for the research. An added element for friendship groups is that the

source participant can host the group in his or her home. The group itself is conducted by a trained moderator, often accompanied by a note taker. In this environment, while the same protocol is administered as it would be in a traditional focus group, the less-structured venue may permit more open conversation, allowing for the natural banter, use of humor, and conversational style that unfolds among friends. The recruitment approach and the use of a home as a facility also have the potential to save time and costs.

Although some researchers caution against conducting groups with those who know one another, it is occasionally done in qualitative research. In fact, it has been suggested that acquaintanceship in focus groups does not necessarily have an adverse effect on the data generated, depending on the skill set of the group moderator (Fern, 1982). Pre-existing groups comprising people who know each other could be argued to have already passed through the early stages of the group process, thus facilitating the free expression of ideas (Lewis, 1992). Some studies have found that groups of acquaintances required less intervention and direction from the moderator than groups of strangers (David & Jones, 1996; Watson & Robertson, 1996). However, it is not clear from the published literature whether participants in groups who know each other feel comfortable discussing certain topics (especially sensitive ones) or opening up about personal experiences (e.g., divorce, cancer). In fact, researchers suggest that greater levels of intimacy among members who know one another may pose an additional burden on the moderator to try to ensure confidentiality among the group members and to try to protect the friendship dynamic (Bender & Ewbanks, 1994; Kidd & Parshall, 2000).

The purpose of the current paper is to examine the feasibility of using the friendship group methodology as an alternative to traditional focus groups for collecting qualitative data. Our research aims to answer the question of whether friendships groups are an effective method for eliciting information that would normally be obtained through traditional focus groups, including identifying advantages and disadvantages of the methodology. We conducted four friendship groups using a protocol on the topic of how physical activity fits within the goals and life values of women ages 20 to 50. This protocol was selected because we felt it had several features that made it a good choice for a methodology testing. First, it had been used successfully in a previous traditional focus group setting for another research project. Second, the topic was not unduly challenging from a recruitment perspective. Finally, since the topic was of general interest, there was minimal risk related to human subject's protection.

Our team members all work at Westat, an employee-owned research company focusing on social science research, including qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, and evidence-based communications. We have backgrounds in behavioral epidemiology, experimental social psychology, cultural anthropology, and community health. In our work, we often focus on collecting data using qualitative research methods. Our team has worked together on numerous qualitative studies, and our open and collegial work environment fosters innovation and creativity in our research practice.

Given that much of our work is funded through competitive contracts with the federal government, we are always interested in exploring innovative, cost-effective methods for collecting qualitative data. We were, therefore, interested in assessing whether friendships groups, a method used in the private sector to collect data in a group setting, might be a feasible approach to collecting qualitative data in a research environment.

Friendship Group Models

This section outlines the methodology employed to conduct the friendship groups. It is organized into two sections: (1) recruitment and (2) implementation. This study was submitted and approved by expedited authority by the Westat Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Recruitment

To recruit the four friendship group source participants or “hosts,” we emailed women from our qualitative research volunteer database who live in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area and are between the ages of 20 and 50. The email contained the topic of the group, how the group would work, the individual’s role as a host, the length of the group (100 minutes), and the incentive amounts. A \$100 gift card incentive was offered to the host in compensation for her time in organizing and hosting the group. A \$30 cash incentive was offered to all other participants. The emails also mentioned that in order to be eligible, the host would need to recruit five to seven other physically active women aged 20 to 50 for the group.

Interested individuals contacted Westat and were screened to ensure they met the eligibility criteria in terms of age and activity level. Once the pool of potential hosts was established, researchers selected hosts with a range of racial and educational backgrounds. Once the hosts were selected and scheduled, we emailed them a reminder of the details of the study, including the eligibility requirements of the individuals they needed to recruit, and we provided them with some sample text they could use when recruiting attendees. Additionally, we explained that two Westat researchers—the moderator and a note taker—would be in attendance on the day of the group. We also asked that no alcohol be offered during the group discussion. Throughout the host’s recruitment process, we answered any questions they had and monitored their recruitment progress.

Implementation

For each friendship group, the moderator and a note taker traveled together to the host’s home. Since the groups were held in homes rather than a neutral environment, procedures were developed on how to handle any concerns regarding researchers’ safety. At the start of each group, participants were provided with a consent form and asked for their permission to audiotape the focus group. Participants were also asked to complete a pre-discussion questionnaire that asked about their typical levels of physical activity; attitudes toward physical activity; height and weight; race and ethnicity; and highest level of education completed.

The group discussions were led by a trained moderator and supported by a trained note taker. The protocol focused on participants’ opinions of general life values and goals, physical activity, and any barriers to including physical activity in their personal lives. In addition, participants were shown several physical activity health messages and asked to assess the effectiveness of the messages in encouraging physical activity.

Feasibility Study Methods

A review of the focus group literature identified important elements to consider in evaluating data quality (Kitzinger, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Ritchie et al., 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Templeton, 1994). Focus group performance indicators were identified in terms of administrative efficiency (e.g., group size, cost of organizing and running the group, and time to organize and run the group), group composition (e.g., sampling strategy, diversity, acquaintanceship, characteristics of source participant), and group dynamics (e.g., participation, focus, trust/sensitivity/openness, level of discussion, harm, confidentiality). Therefore, we assessed the viability of the friendship group methodology in terms of the following indicators:

- **Recruitment methodology, diversity, and costs.** We explored the diversity of participants in terms of race, ethnicity, and education. Costs were measured in terms of recruiter time, including scheduling and arranging replacements.
- **Implementation.** We examined the moderator's experiences after conducting the groups in the home environment and the unique roles of the moderator and the host in the context of a friendship group.
- **Group dynamics.** We explored group dynamics within the four groups, including factors such as acquaintanceship, diversity of opinions, and participant openness.

Recruitment

Friendship groups have the potential to reduce recruiting costs, but they require researchers to sacrifice some control over the composition of the groups in terms of demographic diversity. An inherent risk of the friendship group methodology is that hosts may recruit individuals similar to them, resulting in groups that are not demographically diverse. To address concerns about a possible lack of demographic diversity, we decided to mimic the "purposive" sampling strategy used by researchers in typical focus groups with half of the groups. To do this, two hosts were asked to recruit a "racially diverse" group of friends. The other two hosts were given no instructions about diversity. This allowed us to assess the diversity of friendship groups where the recruitment was more "organic." In order to evaluate the demographic diversity of the friendship groups, we looked at education, race, and ethnicity. (Since gender and age were specified in the eligibility criteria, we did not look at these factors during analysis.)

To assess the relative recruiting costs of the friendship groups, we compared it to what can typically be expected in traditional focus groups. Although traditional focus groups usually involve costs for recruiter labor, advertising, and facility rental, the friendship groups only included labor costs. In our analysis, we compared the actual costs of our friendship groups with the estimated costs of a comparable focus group with similar eligibility criteria and number of participants.

Implementation

The implementation of friendship groups radically differs from traditional focus groups, since it relies on a single "source participant" to recruit and host the group in her own home. Because of this, we anticipated that moderators would face challenges specific to the friendship group methodology. In our analysis, we looked at several factors that might influence implementation of the groups, including environment, moderator role, and the role of the host.

To evaluate these factors for our analysis, we examined four sources of data: note taker observations of the groups, debriefings with moderators and note takers, a post-group questionnaire given to hosts, and transcripts from the friendship groups.

- **Note taker observations.** During the groups, the note taker took extensive notes on her observations of interactions between the moderator and the participants. The note taker documented interruptions (both within and from outside the group), body language, seating arrangements, the layout of the room, and any other details that would not be captured within a transcript.
- **Host's post-group questionnaire.** In the post-group questionnaire, some additional questions were asked of the source participants to capture their

perceptions about the recruitment process and of holding the groups in their own homes.

- **Moderator and note taker debriefings.** After the completion of the four groups, moderators and note takers held a series of debriefings to discuss their experiences conducting the groups. The discussions covered a range of topics, including group dynamics, behavior of the host, the environment in which the group was held, and the moderators' and note takers' own experience conducting the groups. Since all of the moderators were also very experienced focus group moderators, the discussion was often comparative, with the moderators comparing their experiences with typical focus groups with their experiences with the friendship groups.
- **Friendship group transcripts.** Transcripts were reviewed for any factors that affected implementation of the groups, such as interruptions or distractions.

Group Dynamics

The friendship group methodology has the potential to significantly impact the dynamics of the group within the discussion. While focus groups are typically composed of participants who are strangers to each other, friendship groups consist of participants who have varying levels of acquaintance with the other participants. In order to assess group dynamics, we looked at factors frequently cited in the literature related to focus group dynamics. After we engaged with the data, three items strongly related to the methodology emerged:

- **Acquaintanceship**, defined as the level of friendship with host and each other as indicated through length of friendship with the host and relationship with other group participants;
- **Diversity of opinions**, which was demonstrated by interest, reflection, and allowing for dissenters; and
- **Openness**, which was demonstrated through elements of participant trust, sensitivity, and empathy for one another and which may have been influenced by the power dynamics within the group.

Transcripts, audio recordings of the friendship groups, note taker observations, and moderator debriefings were analyzed to examine these three factors. In addition, analysts incorporated data from the post-group questionnaire, which asked participants about their level of acquaintanceship with the host and others in the group.

Data was imported into NVivo 10, software designed for qualitative research (Richards, 1999). An a priori coding structure was developed based on the literature on focus group dynamics. The coding structure incorporated established indicators and measures of acquaintanceship, diversity of opinions, and openness. Two different coders coded data independently. Team members met regularly during the analysis process to refine the codes and address any counterfactuals or outliers. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed by the researchers and resolved. Using this coding, analysts identified themes and patterns within the data.

Results

Our results of the feasibility study are discussed in terms of recruiting, group implementation, and group dynamics. Since the purpose of this study was to determine whether

friendship groups could serve as an alternative to focus groups, our results are compared and contrasted with best practices for focus groups.

Recruitment

Recruiting costs. Recruitment for focus groups is often time consuming and expensive (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Typically, professional recruiters advertise for participants using methods such as newspaper ads, fliers, Craigslist ads, and social media ads. Recruiters also rely on databases composed of individuals who have expressed interest in participating in research. Interested participants are screened to ensure they meet the requirements for participation. Recruiters must also seek to identify and exclude “professional” respondents who regularly participate in focus groups. Researchers review the list of potential participants and select participants based on research goals relative to targeted characteristics and demographic diversity. These selected participants are then contacted and scheduled for a group. Recruiters must remind participants of the upcoming group and be prepared to replace participants who cancel or fail to show. In all, recruitment can be a costly activity for traditional focus groups.

For the friendship groups, researchers needed to recruit only one source, or host, participant for each group. Each source participant was then responsible for recruiting the remaining participants to ensure a group of five to seven women for the discussion. In order to obtain hosts for the friendship groups, recruiters sent out emails to local women ages 20 to 50 in an existing recruiting database. A total of 430 emails were sent, with half of the women receiving an email that explained that hosts would need to recruit purposively a “racially diverse” group of friends, and the other half receiving an email with no instruction about diversity. Only five individuals were interested in hosting a racially diverse “purposive” group, while twice as many (10) individuals were interested in hosting an “organic” group.

We had anticipated that recruiting for the friendship groups would take about a month. However, one of our four hosts canceled at the last minute because she was unable to meet the recruiting goals. Consequently, we needed to recruit a replacement host, which took an additional month. Unlike friendship groups, when a respondent is unable to attend a focus group, the respondent is replaced from a pool of eligible participants and the originally scheduled group can occur as planned. Three of the four groups each had five participants, while the fourth group had six participants, thus meeting our recruiting goal.

As compared to the recruiting and facility costs of a typical focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014), friendship groups were significantly less expensive. A typical focus group can cost between \$3,000 and \$6,000 to recruit, depending upon recruitment criteria and the effectiveness of the incentive. In contrast, the average recruiting cost per friendship group was about \$1,000. In addition, the friendship group methodology avoided the need to rent facility space, which can cost as much as \$1,000 per group, depending upon location.

Diversity of participants. To evaluate the demographic diversity of the groups, we examined the race, ethnicity, and education levels of participants. Because the study recruitment criteria specified participants must be women aged 20 to 50, we did not look at gender or age. The “purposive” friendship groups, for which hosts were asked to recruit a “racially diverse” group of friends, were relatively diverse. Participants represented four different racial/ethnic groups (white, black, Latina, and multi-racial), and no single racial/ethnic group made up more than half of a purposive friendship group.

In contrast, the “organic” groups, for which hosts were given no instructions about diversity, were less diverse. The race of most participants within the “organic” groups tended to reflect the race of the host. In the organic group where the host described herself as black or African American, four out of five respondents also described themselves in this way. In the

organic group where the host described herself as white, three out of four respondents also described themselves as white. Figure 1 shows respondent diversity for the groups.

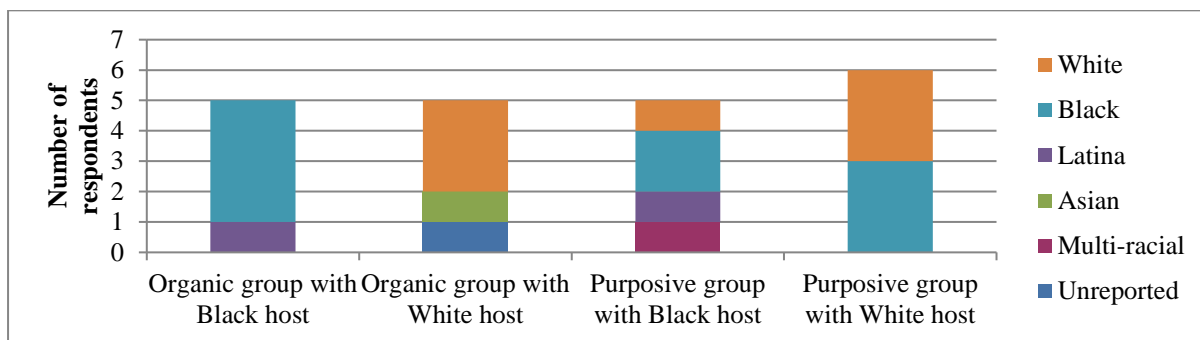


Figure 1. Respondent ethnic and racial diversity

Overall, our participants in both the purposive and organic groups tended to be more highly educated than the general population. In all, 61.3 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, like with race, the education of the friendship group participants tended to reflect the education level of the host. Of the four hosts recruited, one had a high school degree, one had a college degree, and the remaining two had advanced degrees. Hosts with a higher level of education tended to recruit respondents with higher levels of education and vice versa. For instance, in the group with the host with a high school degree, only two of the five respondents had attended any college. In contrast, of the three groups where the host had a college or advanced degree, all of the respondents had attended at least some college, and almost a third had an advanced degree. Figure 2 shows the education levels of the respondents in the focus and friendship groups.

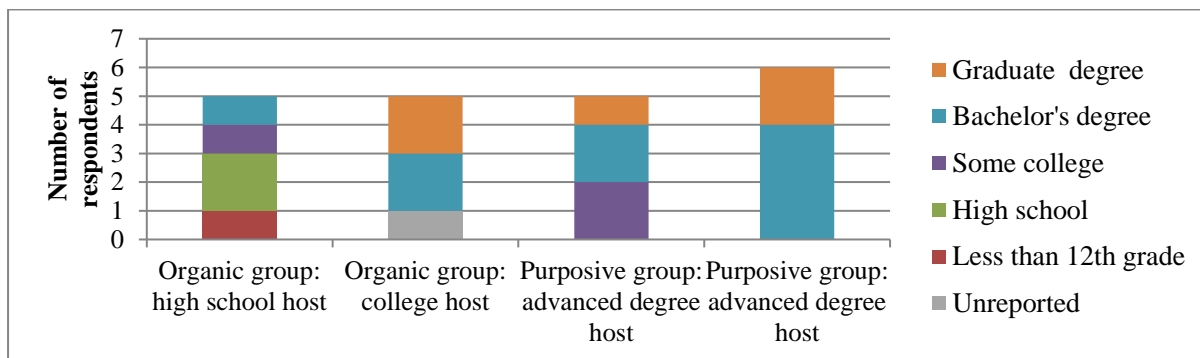


Figure 2. Respondent education levels

Factors Impacting Group Implementation

Below we present several factors that differentiate friendship groups from focus groups and the impact those differences might have on the outcome of the group. These factors provide some insights about differences between friendship and traditional focus groups. We have organized these findings into the following categories:

- Environment;
- Moderator roles; and

- Role of the host.

Environment. Typically, focus groups are held in a neutral space, whether it is a professional focus group facility or a meeting room. Researchers are able to scout out the space before the group and be the first to arrive before the other participants. The space is generally set up so that participants sit in chairs at a table, and the room is self-contained, walled off from other spaces in the building (and, in the case of professional facilities, with observers spatially removed and observing through a one-way mirror or video cameras). While this is not always the case, most focus groups are held in spaces where the moderator can reasonably assume control of the environment, act as host, dictate the spatial arrangement, and minimize distractions (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). In contrast, since the friendship group is held in the host's home, researchers had little control over the environment.

When focus groups are held in professional or neutral spaces, the moderator is able to arrive early and most of the participants arrive on time. In contrast, for the friendship group, the moderator had to balance the professional advantages of arriving early to set up with the norms of how early a guest can arrive. For one of our groups, the moderator and note taker arrived 15 minutes before the group began to find that the host was not ready and that the host's teenage daughter had to welcome them. In addition, across all of the groups, the participants themselves tended to arrive 5 to 10 minutes late. This unplanned delay resulted in having less time for the group discussion than originally planned.

Our moderators did not know how the physical environment would be arranged in advance of the groups. In all four groups, the discussion was held in a living room with participants seated on an assortment of armchairs and sofas, with kitchen chairs pulled in for additional seating. The variation in seating (and the variation in comfort) occasionally was reflected in the dynamics of the group. In one group, a participant—who was relatively new to the group and not well known by the host—opted to sit in a kitchen chair, next to the moderator (also in a kitchen chair). The other participants were ensconced in a comfortable couch or oversized armchair. This spatial isolation appeared to reinforce the newer, less familiar participant's social distance from the others in the group, and the moderator frequently had to encourage her participation.

The moderators and note takers did not always have access to a coffee table or end table, and they were forced to balance materials (including the protocol, consent forms, and multiple handouts for the group) in their laps or on the floor next to their chairs. One host offered TV trays to hold papers and materials. In the first group, respondents also struggled when handed papers for an activity, and they asked why clipboards had not been provided. For subsequent groups, the researchers brought clipboards.

For all of the groups, the living room was part of an open-concept floor plan. As a result, there was the potential for distractions from outside the group itself. In two of the groups, these distractions were minimal—a phone ringing or the host's husband leaving and returning through the adjacent kitchen in order to walk the dog. (The dog then settled under the moderator's chair.) In the other two groups, the distractions were much more substantial. In one group, the home phone was placed on the coffee table in the middle of the group, disturbing the group when it rang. In another group, the host's babysitter canceled at the last minute, leaving the host to care for a 1-year-old throughout the friendship group. The child's cries often distracted the group, sometimes derailing the conversation, and the host frequently had to stop participating in the group to take care of the child. In another group, there were frequent distractions from others in the house, including children watching TV loudly in a nearby room, constant arrivals at the back door, and a male adult in the adjacent kitchen listening to the group discussion.

Moderator role. The literature on focus groups has much to say about the leadership role of the moderator and the way in which the moderator interacts with the group (e.g., Bender & Ewbanks, 1994; Fern, 1982; Kidd & Parshall, 2000). It is important for the moderator to assert a degree of control over the group in order to direct the discussion, keep the group focused, ensure everyone has a chance to speak, and even challenge participants to draw out people's differences (Gibbs, 1997). There is some discussion in the literature about the importance of rapport building before the group begins. Krueger and Casey (2009) note that what happens before the focus group begins sets the tone for the entire discussion, enabling or preventing moderators from performing their required tasks. They encourage moderators to welcome focus group participants as if they were guests coming into their homes, making participants feel welcome, introducing themselves and providing light refreshments. In contrast, holding the group in one of the participant's homes, as well as the fact that the participants are friends or acquaintances, ultimately shifts the initial balance of control that is apparent when focus groups are held in more traditional locations. For friendship groups, the moderator is welcomed into the home and arrives as the guest. The moderator needed to be respectful of that fact in order to establish rapport, but be prepared to take back the control and leadership role once the discussion began, and to relinquish it, returning to the role of guest, immediately after the discussion ended. We found this aspect of conducting friendship groups particularly interesting and one, which we would suggest, is important to take into account when using this methodology. At the end of the group, moderators were often faced with a decision regarding whether to stay to chat more informally when invited or politely decline. In all four groups, moderators chose to decline the invitation to maintain respectful boundaries.

Host role. In a typical focus group, each participant has only one role—that of participant. In a friendship group, the host has two additional roles: recruiter and host. Although typically recruitment is described as taking place well before a group begins, it can in fact spill over into the focus group discussion. In one group, a respondent was a no-show, so the host spent the first 10 minutes of the group texting her to see what happened. Another host was nervous when her recruited participants arrived late. She had arranged back-ups beforehand and was prepared to call them if needed. These activities would typically be handled by a professional recruiter who would have no role in the group itself. The need to spend the first few minutes of the group contacting no-shows or arranging replacements can impact the host's ability to participate fully.

The host is also, of course, the host. The host has personally invited the other participants into her home, and so her fellow participants are also her guests. Several of the hosts provided refreshments and encouraged other participants to partake. One host, who referred to the group as "my party," clearly felt a great deal of pressure to ensure the group was a success. She interjected her own questions and encouraged others to speak, both with her body language and her comments. When the host momentarily stepped into another room, the group broke off from the discussion in her absence. She herself was the most talkative participant and in some ways acted as a "co-moderator" in her efforts to be a good host to everyone involved. While talkative respondents are a challenge in any group discussion, it can be difficult for a moderator to mitigate this behavior in the host when in the host's home.

Group Dynamics

To assess the viability of the friendship group methodology, we looked at three factors important to group dynamics: acquaintanceship, the diversity of opinions expressed, and the openness of the group discussion.

Acquaintanceship. The literature cautions against including people who know each other in the same focus group. Templeton (1994) identified a number of problems created by having friends in the same group, including the potential to:

- discourage anonymity;
- impair group formation by not joining;
- engage in private conversations that prevent their insights to the larger group;
- inhibit the expression of opinion by others; and
- endorse one another's views, creating an imbalance of opinion in the group.

It is argued that focus groups with strangers both avoid the potentially “polluting” and “inhibiting” effect of existing relationships between group members and avoid “group-think,” whereby members of the groups try to avoid upsetting the balance of the group (Kitzinger, 2005). As such, focus groups with strangers have been said to provide “better” data.

We began this research with the assumption that the level of acquaintanceship would directly affect the functioning of the group. To assess this assumption, we used the indicators of level of friendship with the host and the number of other participants known in the focus group. These two indicators are explored with descriptive statistics below.

Level of acquaintanceship with host. Participants were asked to report how well they knew the host of the friendship group on a scale from 1 (“very well”) to 4 (“not at all”). Across both types of groups, the level of acquaintanceship with the host was high, and there was little difference between the organic and purposive friendship groups. Out of the 17 total participants in all four groups, 12 reported knowing the host very well, quite well, or “kind of well” (a written-in response). Five participants reported knowing the host not well (three participants) or not at all (two participants). Figure 3 shows the level of respondent familiarity with the host.

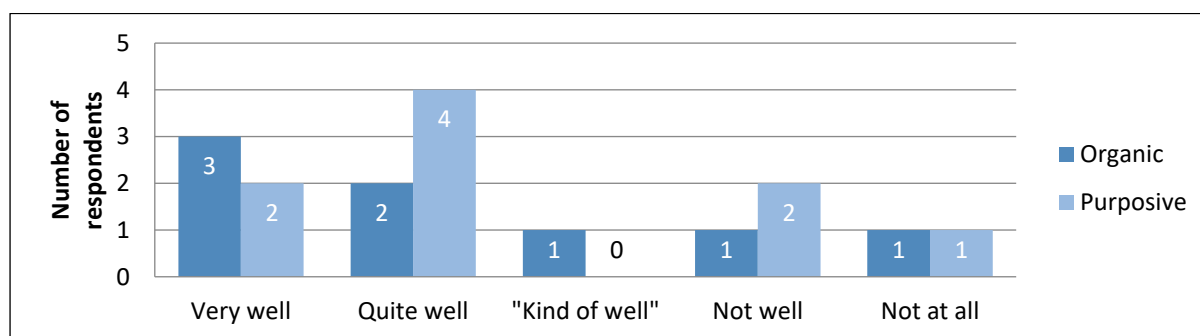


Figure 1. Level of respondent familiarity with host

Number of other participants known. In a post-survey questionnaire, participants were asked how many other participants in their group they knew. There was little difference in the number of participants known between the organic friendship groups and the purposive friendship groups. Of the 17 total respondents, 13 knew one or two other participants, and four participants knew three or four others.

Although there were varying levels of acquaintanceship among the participants, overall, they did not know as many other participants as we had expected. Figure 4 shows the number of other participants each respondent knew, excluding the host.

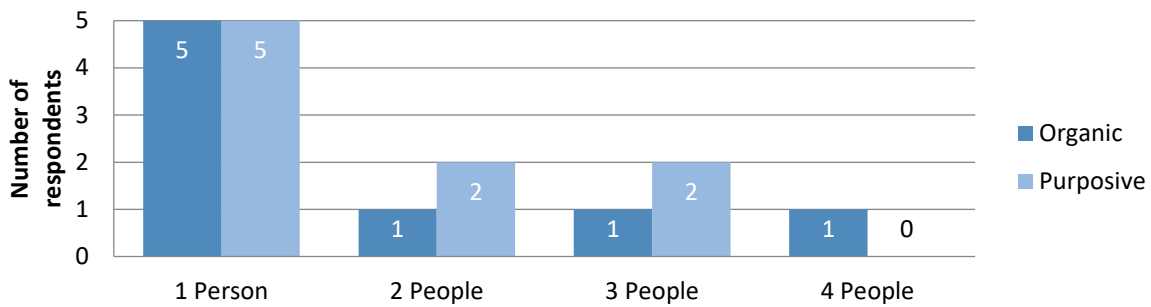


Figure 2. Number of other participants each respondent knew (excluding host)

Diversity of opinions. Because the aim of focus groups is to facilitate a dialogue between participants, the literature advocates aiming for a level of homogeneity within each group. The similarities that participants find among themselves when groups are recruited with homogeneity in mind facilitate participation in the discussion, capitalizing on people’s shared experiences. However, high group cohesiveness may also mean that individuals in the group are more likely to be influenced by one another. The literature also expresses concern that friendship groups may censor deviation from group standards, thereby inhibiting participants from expressing dissenting opinions or experiences (Bender & Ewbanks, 1994). Traditional focus groups ensure a level of diversity to stimulate discussion, allowing for agreement and disagreement during the course of the conversation.

In our friendship groups, cohesion was evident when one group was asked what helps them do the things they consider most important, and the following exchange occurred:

Participant: I did leave one thing out that I could probably say.

Moderator: Sure, go ahead.

Participant: That would just be God.

Participant: Always number one.

Participant: I know for a fact, at least for three of you. The other two I haven’t gotten to know as much, but at least the two of you out of the five of us here, that’s motivating.

Participant: Religion is very motivating.

Participants also demonstrated cohesion by referencing each other’s responses, stating “I agree with [her]” or “My thoughts are similar.”

Although the friendship groups demonstrated agreement in many instances, they also provided space for disagreement. In a discussion of an advertisement featuring exercise, one respondent noted she and another respondent are “quite different, because I know she loves Zumba, but I don’t like it loud. This does not appeal to me.” Earlier in the same group, several respondents offered differing opinions about working out at the gym:

- “For me, my thought is the gym when it comes to physical activity. That’s where I go as my stress reliever. I’ve even held conference calls on the treadmill.”
- “When I’m in the gym, there’s just so much going on, there’s so much. ... I can’t block it out. For me, if I’m outside, specifically if I’m out in the woods, it’s a different thing. Even being on the highway, if you’re on a busy street, it just distracts me. I can’t zone it out.”
- “I didn’t like the idea of getting to the gym. I felt that was a waste of time. I didn’t like working out with all the sweaty people at the gym, and so I was always very motivated to.... I would jog and then I had weights at home.”

Like traditional focus groups, the friendship groups we conducted showed both consensus among participants as well as disagreement and diversity of opinions.

Openness. Although a certain amount of homogeneity is necessary in focus groups to ensure participants share a common interest, trait, or circumstance relevant to the research question, participants are generally recruited as strangers. The literature suggests that participants speak more freely in front of others they do not know and whom they are unlikely to see again, as there is little fear of subsequent gossip or repercussion (Ritchie et al., 2014). Ritchie argues that groups of acquaintances are less likely to voice differences and therefore lack this openness.

The results of our friendship groups, however, suggest that this methodology does not prohibit openness. Participants discussed a variety of sensitive topics. In one group, for example, a participant discussed her fertility related to physical health issues:

Participant: I also have other health issues. Have you heard of PCOS? Polycystic ovary syndrome. Usually it's cysts on your ovaries. If I maintain my weight in a certain level, I have my menstrual cycle. I know this is TMI [...].

Participant: [laughs]

Participant: This is why I work out so I can have my period naturally so I can have my children.

Other sensitive topics discussed included lack of employment, problems with weight, physical and mental health issues, and sexual activity. Despite concerns in the literature that friendship groups inhibit openness, the participants in our groups were willing to discuss sensitive topics. This may be due to the fact that participants' level of acquaintanceship with each other was lower than we had expected; in effect, our "friends" were mostly "strangers."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the feasibility of using friendship groups to collect qualitative data typically gathered using traditional focus groups. To date, we are unaware of any research literature comparing the quality of the data obtained from friendship groups with that from focus groups. It is conceivable that friendship groups may offer a more honest and open discussion among participants than do focus groups simply because of the comfort level among the participants. In addition, because the context of a friendship group is shaped by the host participant, observational data may augment information obtained through the formal discussion. Alternately, traditional focus groups may yield a broader range of perspectives because of the participants' lack of personal connections, and thus better serve the needs of an exploratory study.

Although the friendship groups in this study appeared to be a viable and cost-efficient recruitment methodology, the small sample sizes, a relatively easy-to-recruit target population (active women of all ages), and a non-sensitive topic (physical activity) make it difficult to assess whether this methodology would be successful for other studies involving more sensitive topics or vulnerable populations.

We strongly encourage other qualitative researchers to compare systematically the research findings obtained from friendship groups with focus groups. In addition, it would be interesting to further examine and possibly replicate whether the subjective factors such as the environment, roles of the moderator and host, and safety concerns are found to be workable and allow the expected flow of conversation. Based on our findings, we would recommend using other facilities in addition to the home, such as an office space where the host works, as

a way to minimize the distractions we experienced in the host's home. Topic sensitivity is also an area we suggest others investigate. We expect that some topics will be more conducive to a friendship group environment than other topics, although that remains an important empirical question.

Importantly, while this study determined that the methodology itself is feasible, it did not compare the findings received from both methods of data collection. In future studies, we plan to examine a number of different indicators of data quality, such as the breadth and depth of the discussion topics, the amount of divergence of opinion, and the level of participation of all the members in future studies.

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