

# Analyzing focus group interviews

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Over the years I've been asked lots of questions about analysis. Here are the most frequently asked questions and my answers. Keep in mind that my first answer for almost all of these questions is: "It depends." Your situation or environment and the type of study you are doing are major factors that influence how analysis might best be done. OK, given that caveat, here is an attempt to answer the most common questions.

## Questions about Analysis

### Q. How do I get started?

**A.** Think through your analysis protocol before you finalize your questions. Develop an analysis plan. Consider what is needed in the final report or in the deliverables. Think about your timeline. How much time are you able to invest in the analysis? What is the sequence of steps that is needed to complete the project? Then, look over your questions and think about how you are going to capture the data and analyze each question. You might find that you need to revise some questions or develop procedures that help you collect critical data in a way that will influence your analysis (e.g. making list on flip charts, drawing pictures and collecting those pictures, etc.).

### Q. How much time should I allocate for analysis?

**A.** Consider these factors:

- What is needed in the final report or in the deliverable? A bulleted report? A narrative report with illustrative quotes? A refereed journal article? A dissertation? Reports that are referred or judged by committees will command more analytic time.
- How many different target audiences do you want to compare and contrast? It will take you less time to analyze how new moms feel about a particular program than to analyze how new moms, new dads, and home healthcare nurses feel about a program.
- What type of focus group study are you conducting?
  - Are you pilot testing educational materials, project ideas, or new

products to find out what options people prefer before proceeding? The data from these groups is usually straightforward and easy to analyze. You want to know which materials, ideas, or products participants preferred and why. This type of study doesn't require a great deal of time for analysis.

- Or are you trying to understand how people feel or think about a complex social, health, or environmental issue? The analysis for complex studies can be quite time consuming.
- How critical is it to be right? If you are conducting focus groups to evaluate the office newsletter, you probably don't need that same level of analysis as if you are conducting focus groups to plan a \$1,000,000 obesity intervention program.

So the answer to how much time should I allocate for analysis depends on a number of factors. The more complex the study, the more time analysis will take. If you are planning on using transcripts, you might assume that it will take 6 - 10 hours to prepare each transcript. Then assuming that you have 3 or 4 focus groups and are using field notes, transcripts, and selective listening to the audio recording you might plan for 60 to 100 hours to arrive at a draft narrative report with quotes. Don't be surprised if it takes another 20 or so hours for edits and revisions before the report is finalized. If you have never done analysis before, plan to add about 30% more time.

I have seen some masters conduct brilliant analysis in a very rapid manner using their memory. This occurs more frequently in market research focus groups where you have professional moderators with years of experience and an intensive understanding of the topic of study. These masters conclude the focus group and then walk into the viewing room to visit with the clients. The moderator gives an oral report and zeros in on the critical aspects that need additional attention and helps the clients direct their attention to the most important

findings. Not every moderator can do this, but it is impressive when it occurs.

Recruiting and analysis are the two most time-consuming tasks when conducting focus groups. Estimating the time needed for these is challenging. But after you have completed your first focus group study, you will have a better understanding of how much time to set aside for analysis.

### **Q. How do I capture data?**

**A.** Do it in multiple ways because you should never completely trust one method. Consider these options:

Memory – Each member of the research team who was present at the group has memories of the experience. These memories are valuable but fleeting. You begin forgetting information as soon as the group is over. Convert your memories into field notes and / or audio record your memories in the debriefing, which occurs immediately after each focus group.

Field notes -- One or more members of the research team are assigned to take field notes during the focus group. Use a predetermined strategy for note taking that allows you to identify the speakers, capture the most meaningful quotes, record the main ideas expressed, record relevant observations, and in a separate location in the field notes to jot down the insights or interpretation of the notetaker.

Flip charts, lists and drawings completed during the focus group – Focus group participants might be asked to complete rating forms, make lists, draw pictures, prepare diagrams or engage in some activity that has a tangible product. All of these materials ought to be gathered, labeled, and saved for later analysis. Regularly these products are used to focus the discussion. Participants describe their diagrams or drawings and the moderator invites comments and feedback. Their insights about the meaning of the results can be enlightening.

Audio recorder -- Audio recording is low cost and unobtrusive. For years we used a remote microphone placed in the center of the table connected to a cassette tape recorder located off the table and beside the assistant moderator. However, in the past few years digital recorders have shown remarkable clarity in capturing group conversations. We have preferred the digital recorders because of advantages in

sound quality, the ease of transferring data, and overall convenience.

Laptop computer -- A designated person with rapid keyboard skills is assigned to type the focus group conversation in real time. In some groups where the conversation is fast and furious, the typist might only capture 50% of the conversation, but in other focus groups where there are slight pauses and a slower conversation, the typist might get 75% or more of the discussion. Later the results can be spell checked and compared to the audio recording to complete the transcript. The advantage is that you can obtain a considerable amount of the transcript in real time. When using this technique it is important that the typist doesn't attract attention or interfere with the discussion in the focus group.

Video recording -- Video recordings of focus groups seem to work better from behind one-way mirrors or from ceiling cameras that are less obvious to the participants. While we have colleagues who have had favorable experiences with video recording, our experience has been mixed. To some, a video camera is more intrusive than an audio recorder and cameras can be a constant reminder that you are recording.

### **Q. Do I need transcripts?**

**A.** Sometimes. Give careful thought to this. I would recommend a transcript:

- If you plan to publish results in a journal or professional publication
- If the study is for a dissertation
- If you plan to use computer software to analyze
- If this is your first time analyzing focus groups
- If the topic is complicated and involves subtle distinctions in language

### **Q. Analysis based on verbatim transcripts would seem to be the best. Is there anything better or more accurate than actual transcripts?**

**A.** Maybe. A number of years ago when my colleagues and I began analyzing focus groups we assumed that complete transcripts were the Holy Grail. We went through a lot of transcripts and we made some interesting discoveries. Even the best transcript can contain subtle errors. The transcriber usually isn't present at

the focus group and may miss vital information. Here are some errors we've noticed:

- Errors of omission (something is left out).
- Errors of misinterpretation (wrong word is transcribed—"hi" versus "high").
- Errors due to missing names of respondents or incorrect identification of respondents. (thereby limiting our ability to detect how many different people responded)
- Errors due to assuming that all statements had equal verbal emphasis.

It is my guess that a complete transcript might contain about 75% of the total data that occurs in a focus group. The other 25% are the things that you can only get by being present at the focus group. By being present you get a sense of the mood, the energy, the enthusiasm and all the things that make conversation dynamic. Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating foregoing transcripts. I'm advocating that the person who is responsible for analysis be present in the focus groups. Transcripts can certainly be helpful, but we must recognize their limitations.

### **Q. What are the ingredients of a good focus group transcript?**

**A.** We have found that when we ask for a transcript we sometimes get "minutes" which merely summarize the key points. Other times we get abridged comments and sometimes we get the verbatim discussion. What you want is to have every word typed. Be sure that the transcriptionist types everything that is said. Use a designed protocol where you identify the comments of the moderator (maybe bold print) and then double space between speakers, but single space quotes. It is quite difficult to attach names to the transcript and if this is needed, you will need to consult your field notes to make these additions. Spot check the accuracy of your transcripts by reading the document while listening to the audio recording. Lastly, bring flowers and treats to your transcriptionist.

### **Q. Should I use qualitative analysis software?**

**A.** Maybe. The major advantage is that it gives an aura of accuracy. Some journal reviewers or dissertation committees might be impressed and assume that the computer adds rigor, consistency or objectivity. The major disadvantages are the time needed to learn the

software and the extra time needed to code the data. Computer analysis of qualitative data generally takes more time. In fact, the computer doesn't really do the analysis in a way similar to that of quantitative analysis. Instead, the software allows the researcher to see sets of data that you have previously coded. By seeing relevant data grouped together it is easier to see patterns and trends. The qualitative software does not prepare tests, show associations, or do the things one would expect of statistical software. Some programs can show linkages of ideas or codes that might provide insight to the researcher.

The website of the American Evaluation Association ([aea.org](http://aea.org)) contains a listing of qualitative software programs and sources. Some software is considered powerful (NVivo, Atlas ti, Ethnograph, etc.) and is popular in education, policy analysis, and other fields. This high-end software is relatively expensive, non-intuitive, and is best learned by taking a class, having a mentor or completing an on-line tutorial. Increasingly, researchers are adapting existing software (word processing, spreadsheet, or database) to use in qualitative analysis. These programs allow the researcher to develop codes that can be inserted by use of words, fonts, colors, symbols, etc and then these codes can be counted, retrieved or sorted.

If you are serious about conducting focus groups, then you should be familiar with qualitative software. Just the process of learning the protocol can improve your other analytic strategies.

### **Q. How do I analyze pictures or diagrams?**

**A.** It is similar to strategies that are used when analyzing words. We look for patterns or themes. We identify anything unusual that stands out and then seek amplification. We might invite the participants to help us interpret the meaning. For example, in a diagram or flow chart we might ask participants to first construct the visual and then when finished to identify the part that is of greatest importance or concern to them. Often the discussion of interpretation by participants sheds valuable insight into the problem. Yet another strategy is by using comparison. We compare artifacts prepared by one participant to that of another participant. Or we ask for visuals to be prepared at two points in time and discuss how they differ. We might ask for drawings that depict two different

individuals and then we compare one to the other. (For example, a number of years ago a dog food company was concerned about their image. They had focus group participants draw a picture of a dog owner who used the designated dog food and then they had participants draw a picture of themselves. The contrast revealed that the dog food was perceived to be used by people very different from those in the focus group.)

### **Q. Should I count things?**

**A.** Yes, but be careful of your interpretation. Counting is seductive. When we count things we assume that it has some type of meaning. The strength of focus group research is not based on counting, but on understanding the discussion. I've seen situations where the most critical finding was only mentioned once, but because of the relevance and the responses of other participants it took on considerable importance. Counting in focus groups is tricky because we count how many people might have mentioned a particular topic. Regularly there are some who choose to be silent. What does silence mean? Or on some issues there may be social pressure to conform to the rest of the group.

I have found that rating exercises where we use scales can be helpful in focus groups. Sometimes there is too much ambiguity in words and the numbers of a rating scale help pinpoint the degree of support, interest, agreement, etc.

### **Q. How is analysis of a focus group different from that of an individual interview?**

**A.** A focus groups is more like a conversation than an interview. Most qualitative analysis procedures are designed for textual materials such as manuscripts, transcripts of interviews, books, etc. Whereas in a focus group there is usually not the opportunity for a single person to lay out in detail his or her thinking. Instead it comes in bits and pieces as he or she responds to a variety of questions. During that time the participant is interacting, talking to, arguing with, or agreeing with others in the group. Group discussions don't flow smoothly and may not be either linear or sequential. Participants react to others and sometimes do things that are less common in individual discourse – such as using irony, reacting to others with extreme positions, or diplomatically and delicately talking about a topic where others have sensitivity. In short, the focus group needs to be analyzed like a conversation and not like an interview. You must

think about the context and be sensitive to what was said earlier in the conversation. Conversations contain elements such as these, which are not typical of other textual materials:

- Silence after someone eloquently expresses a view.
- Not repeating a comment or point because someone else just said it.
- Making changes in how to express a point due to reactions from other participants.
- Avoiding topics that incite others in the group.
- After a rambling discussion, someone else might succinctly lay out the key points simply because the earlier person was so confusing.
- Some participants might temper their statements and take a more compromising position after hearing strongly held views.

### **Q. You've stressed that analysis should be systematic and verifiable. What does that mean?**

**A.** These are the pillars of analysis. By systematic I mean that you need to use an analytic process in a consistent and predictable manner and also be able to articulate that process. This process tells others how you conducted the groups, how you sought feedback from participants at the conclusion of the group, how you conducted a debriefing with the research team, and how colleagues helped code the data. It is verifiable in that you leave a trail of evidence. If necessary, someone could replicate your analysis by using the field notes, audio recordings, and transcripts.

### **Q. You have written about the “Long Table Approach” to analysis. What is it and do you still recommend it?**

**A.** This is a method that has roots going back at least 60 years. It is low tech but dependable and relatively easy to use. Yes, we still encourage others to use it. It consists of cutting up the transcripts and sorting the responses to each question into categories. The process is described in Chapter 6 of Focus Groups (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) and in Chapter 6 of Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results.

**Q. So, what are the key things that I need to remember to do good analysis?**

**A.** Here is my short list of critical steps:

- Plan ahead – Allow sufficient time for analysis.
  - Develop good questions – Some questions are difficult if not impossible to analyze.
  - Summarize the discussion at the end and ask participants for verification – Find out early if you are on the right track. If they hesitate, ask for their help in making sense out of the discussion.
  - Conduct debriefing with research team -
    - Compare notes with research colleagues soon after the group concludes.
- Analyst should be there – Many things are learned by just watching the group and listening to how they talk. You can only get that by being there.
  - Know where to look for information – Not all questions are equal. Know which questions are most central to your purpose, spend adequate time getting participants to talk about these topics, and concentrate your time in analysis on these topics.
  - Be systematic -- Have a process and be able to describe it to others.
  - Work with a colleague – Two heads are better than one. Consider having a colleague with life experiences different from your own.

About the author

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References:

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