



Methodology or “methodolatry”? An evaluation of focus groups and depth interviews

David Stokes

*Small Business Research Centre, Business School, Kingston University,
Kingston-upon-Thames, UK, and*

Richard Bergin

Stratelist, Vancouver, Canada

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this research was to consider whether focus groups have justifiably become a more frequently used qualitative market research technique because of a superior research outcome. Although focus groups have extrinsic advantages such as speed and cost, there is evidence that individual depth interviews have intrinsic advantages relating to the quality of the research outcome.

Design/methodology/approach – A parallel research study was undertaken examining a single business issue using both focus groups and individual interviews. Results of both processes were analysed for relevance to the business issue. Follow up individual interviews with participants of the focus groups were undertaken to assess the validity of the data collected, and to investigate the nature of the processes in the groups.

Findings – Group processes appear to have had considerable influence on the consensus view expressed in focus groups, which may not be representative of respondents’ individual views. Both the groups and the interviews identified the principle issues relating to buyer motivations and processes, target markets and branding. The groups were unable to match the depth and detail generated by individual interviews and to uncover subtleties in attitudes. The interviews offered less breadth of data and contextual information.

Practical implications – Whilst groups may be less expensive and faster in data collection, individual interviews demonstrated a superior ability to inform marketing strategy by uncovering important underlying issues.

Originality/value – The findings indicate that groups do not justify their predominance as a market research method in preference to interviews on the grounds of quality of outcomes alone.

Keywords Focus groups, Interviews, Market research

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The predominance of focus groups: qualitative “Methodolatry”?

Two important methodological trends became apparent within the market research industry during the 1990s that have continued to the present. First, qualitative designs took a higher share of research budgets at the expense of quantitative methods. Secondly, within qualitative research, focus groups became more frequently used at the expense of the individual depth interview. The European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research reported that by 1997 groups accounted for almost two-thirds of qualitative research expenditure (Association of Qualitative Research Practitioners, 2001). This trend has continued in favour of focus groups (Greenbaum, 2003).

This has prompted concerns that focus groups have become so synonymous with qualitative market research that they have become the unchallenged choice (Birn *et al.*, 1990; Greenbaum, 1998; Cassell and Symon, 2004), and therefore, may be used inappropriately (Roe, 1988; Robson, 1993; Krueger and Casey, 2000). Could this have reached the level of what Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 48) term “methodolatry” or “a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told”? Certainly, many of the advantages claimed for focus groups relate to extrinsic issues of process (e.g. quicker, cheaper, observable by clients, easier to analyse), rather than the quality of the research outcome. It is possible that such extrinsic benefits are influencing researchers and their clients towards the use of groups at the expense of the insightfulness of the research findings. This paper addresses this issue by comparing the results of research into a common business issue using both focus groups and individual depth interviews.

Pros and cons of focus groups

A focus group can be defined as “. . . a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment upon, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Gibbs, 1997, p. 1). Zikmund (1997) summarised the advantages of such group discussions as “10 Ss”:

- (1) Synergy – the group process generates a wider range of information than would accrue from a comparable number of depth interviews.
- (2) Snowballing – respondent interaction creating a chain of thought and ideas.
- (3) Serendipity – a great idea can drop out of the blue.
- (4) Stimulation – respondent’s views are brought out by the group process.
- (5) Security – respondents are more likely to be candid as there will probably be other similar people there, and there is less individual pressure than in a depth interview.
- (6) Spontaneity – because no one individual is required to respond to a question, this encourages a spontaneous response when people have a definite point of view.
- (7) Specialisation – a trained moderator can interview more respondents in a given session.
- (8) Structure – it is easier for the moderator to reintroduce a topic not adequately covered before than in a depth interview.
- (9) Speed – quicker than individual interviews.
- (10) Scrutiny – can be observed by members of the research team.

Gibbs (1997) suggested a further “S” – saliency in that groups help to elicit why a particular issue is salient. Groups also highlight differences between consumers, making it possible to understand a range of behaviour (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988; Morgan, 1998; Fern, 2001). It would appear that the deeper benefits of focus groups derive from two features: group interaction (Burns, 1989; Albrecht *et al.*, 1993) and the replication of social forces (Robson, 1990; Krueger and Casey, 2000).

It is clear that the process of group dynamics, responsible for many of the advantages of focus groups, can be regarded as a double-edged sword. Participants

may feel inhibited in a group situation (Hedges, 1985; Greenbaum, 1998) and social pressures can also cause over-claiming (Webb, 1995; Greenbaum, 2003). Some respondents publicly agree to the views of others, whilst privately disagreeing (Robson, 1990). Group interaction can produce a consensus view (Bloom, 1989), with potentially limited validity (Griggs, 1987). This is potentially a severe criticism of the focus group methodology, given the implication that consensus may mean a view that nobody disagrees with, but equally that nobody wholly endorses.

Some of the benefits claimed for focus groups may be illusory. For example, the oft-quoted benefits of time and cost (Crimp and Wright, 1995; Chisnall, 1997) have rarely been systematically tested, and where they have been (Roe, 1988; Crabtree *et al.*, 1993), these attributes were called into question. Focus groups are sometimes justified as a convenient way to get the outlook of a wider number of people (Robson and Foster, 1989). But this could be misleading, if the group processes lead to consensus within the group implying that the unit of analysis is a single unit – the group – rather than the cumulative number of respondents who attended it (Birn *et al.*, 1990; Crabtree *et al.*, 1993; Fern, 2001).

Pros and cons of individual depth interviews

An individual depth interview can be defined as: “...an unstructured personal interview which uses extensive probing to get a single respondent to talk freely and to express detailed beliefs and feelings on a topic” (Webb, 1995, p. 121). The advantages of this method fall into three broad categories:

- (1) Circumstances of unique applicability, especially those involving sensitive or personal topics (Robson and Foster, 1989).
- (2) Sampling advantages including greater control over respondent selection, and hence, more depth, context and flexibility in the process of inquiry (Cassell and Symon, 2004).
- (3) Preferential outcome, in terms of the depth and comprehensiveness of information that they can yield (Hedges, 1985). Berent (1966) suggested two main reasons for this: firstly the opportunity for the respondent – frequently for the first time – really to analyse the motivations for a particular action. Secondly, and more crucially in Berent’s view, is the unusualness of being listened to, which, together with the anonymity afforded, gives the respondent a feeling of empowerment. Webb (1995) listed specific preferential outcomes:
 - it is possible to ascribe the views to individual respondents, allowing for more precise interpretation;
 - it affords the opportunity to build a close rapport and a high degree of trust, thus improving the quality of the data; and
 - it allows for easier expression of non-conformity.

The main criticism of individual depth interviews is that they miss out on the advantages of interaction with other consumers (Robson, 1990). The issue here is whether the structural advantages outweigh the disadvantages for the particular research subject in hand. In particular, the impact of sociability pressures, relating to both decision-making and consumption, may be an important arbiter on the value of respondent interaction. Greenbaum (1998) considers that individual depth interviews

are more difficult to interpret, due to the sequential nature of data gathering masking an overview of consensus. Zikmund (1997), Fern (2001) and Cassell and Symon (2004), respectively, make the arguments of speed and cost against individual depth interviews, whilst Berent (1966), Willis (1990) and Greenbaum (2003) make the point (from the client's point of view) that individual depth interviews suffer from not being an observable research technique.

Methodology

The primary aim of this research was to assess the relative merits of focus groups and individual depth interviews in assessing the same market research issue. Parallel studies, one using groups and one using depth interviews, examined the same research question simultaneously. The results were compared to assess differences and appropriateness of the findings. In addition, group processes were separately examined because the value of focus groups strongly relates to whether these processes obscure through the pressures of conformity, or provide insight through the process of interaction.

The business issue investigated by both focus groups and individual interviews was the relative potential in different target markets for an innovative Italian design of optical frames. The product incorporated a folding mechanism in which the support arms of the frames folded above and below the lens section rather than behind it. This gave an ultra-slim profile, and the benefits of compactness and easy portability. The particular issue under investigation was the relative attractiveness of this product in two market sectors: optical glasses and sunglasses.

Four focus groups were conducted, two examining the optical sector and two the sunglasses market. Eight individual depth interviews were also conducted during the same week. Both groups and interviews used a topic agenda covering the same issues, although the structure varied according to appropriate conventions for the research method. The same researcher facilitated all the groups and carried out all of the interviews.

For both groups and interviews, the sample definition took account of the increase in penetration of the wearing of glasses over the age of 45. There is no significant bias to sex or region, but it would appear that wearing optical devices is slightly more prevalent amongst the ABC1 socio-economic categories. The sample definition for the two sunglasses groups was hampered by the fact that there is no reliable profile data, and it was, therefore assumed, from empirical evidence, that the respondent profile should be BC1C2, 25-35 years. The groups were further split by gender observing the established principle of respondent homogeneity (Morgan, 1998). In the absence of significant regional bias, the research was held in the south east of England. The depth interviews also conformed to this structure. Respondents were recruited by an independent research agency to conform to these parameters and offered a small payment to cover expenses and refreshments. They were filtered at a recruitment questionnaire stage to eliminate factors that may introduce bias (for example, respondents who had recently made a purchase were excluded).

The research was structured in two stages. The first stage of the four focus groups and the eight interviews allowed for a direct comparison of results between the two methods and their relevance to the business issue. It was followed by a second stage in which eight of the respondents who had attended the focus groups (two per group)

were re-interviewed using individual depth interviews. The purpose of this second stage was:

- to compare the group findings to the responses and attitudes of the group members when interviewed individually; and
- to attempt to gain understanding of how group processes acted on the individuals, and how this was reflected in the views they either held or developed within the group.

Two respondents were chosen at random from each of the four focus groups and re-interviewed individually almost immediately after the group discussions.

In this way two types of comparisons could be drawn between the methods: a comparison of results using different respondents and different methods; and a comparison of the results when the same respondents were interviewed using different methods. This dual approach allowed for richer findings than just one comparative analysis, but still nonetheless produced conceptual rather than generalisable findings because of the nature of the sample size. As one researcher conducted the focus groups and interviews, there is also possibility of interviewer bias in the results.

The data of relevance in this paper is the comparison between the results of the two research methods, rather than the results themselves as these have only secondary relevance to the research aims presented here. Therefore, the analysis below does not follow the traditional qualitative format using verbatims of respondents to support arguments. Rather, the results here focus on the interviewer's observations and analysis of the responses of interviewees and the comparative findings of the research processes. In this way, the unit of analysis has become the researcher rather than the researched in order to facilitate a comparison between the two research methods based on the interpretations of the interviewer.

Analysis of results

Commentary on analysis of focus groups: optical sector

In the two focus groups that examined the potential for the product design in the optical glasses market, there was quick agreement on the general aspects of wearing glasses, which gave an early indication that group processes may have been tending towards consensus. This included an eagerness for respondents to add to the discussion, and it seemed that reaching early consensus was part of the group "forming" process that gave a useful breadth of views quickly. This supported the views of Burns (1989), Albrecht *et al.* (1993), Holstein and Gubrium (1995) and Greenbaum (2003) who all suggested that group dynamics provide valuable breadth by multi-vocality.

The "norming" process quickly became evident in both groups, manifested by a drive for group agreement. An early comment that the products appeared somewhat cheap and plastic-like caught hold and permeated across the range of issues. Thus the process became a circular set of assumptions: products look cheap and plastic, leading to a perception of a far-eastern source, leading to the assumption that the glasses were a disposable item, leading to their perceived application as a secondary rather than a primary optical device, leading to the assumption that they must be cheap.

Whilst the view of cheapness permeated group consensus, this view was not always maintained when individual respondents were probed. For example, personal interest

in specific models did not diminish when the actual price was revealed to be significantly higher than the group estimation. Respondents claimed that they had few initial problems getting used to wearing optical glasses for the first time as they were pleased with significantly improved sight. This was probed because it was dissonant with their earlier view that respondents had generally resisted the need for glasses when it first became apparent. Despite additional probing, no further data was forthcoming, leaving a question mark over this issue. The experience supported the observation of Fern (2001) that groups can conspire to skirt around real issues, even to the extent of obscuring their existence.

The group findings indicated that multiple pairs of glasses are built up as the eyesight deteriorates; the prescription changes and new glasses are acquired, yet the old glasses are rarely discarded. Respondents positioned this as mere convenience to have older pairs available for secondary use, despite outdated prescriptions. When considered, there was general agreement that this may not be sensible behaviour in terms of longer-term eye health. Secondary use covers lower-profile occasions, such as bedtime reading, with main pairs being used for more significant, public occasions. This multiple pair usage was, therefore, interpreted as a requirement to maintain an optical safety net, out of a fear of being placed in a situation where they simply cannot cope because they do not have access to glasses. This conclusion was significant in relation to any marketing strategy aiming at secondary usage, which would need to acknowledge the existence of these motivations.

Commentary on analysis of individual depth interviews: optical sector

It was established in the individual interviews that the need for glasses, when finally accepted, still remained unwelcome. Probing revealed that initial resistance occurred because acceptance would be a public admission of getting older, and an acknowledgement of mortality. Thus, the reported pleasure at the improved eyesight becomes in reality an attempt to put a positive rationalisation on an otherwise unwelcome prospect.

Complex issues such as the influence of appearance, style and suitability of a frame in the buying process were investigated by projective techniques. The manner of the response indicated that this questioning was probing areas about which there had been no previous conscious thought. This lends confirmation to the utility of projective techniques in enhancing the depth of responses (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988; Krueger, 1998). One interpretation of responses is that the “look” is a dominant purchase motivator because it was strongly linked with the issue of impending mortality. To ameliorate an otherwise depressing scenario, the psyche seeks the best “look” to put the maximum positive perspective on the fait accompli of needing glasses and getting older. The depth of this data supports the view that an advantage of individual interviews is the ability to get at nuances and subtleties of meaning (Tull and Hawkins, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

Thus the reaction given to the product range was positive because the product addressed a practical need within glasses wearing, but not emphatically so because the product did not feed a psychological need to look good. The initial reaction to the new products was not a quick judgement, and showed consideration of the applicability of the concept to personal requirements, rather than just as a concept per se. For example, the issue of cheapness was considered, but did not dominate. This process was useful

in highlighting the issue of “saliency” (Gibbs, 1997). Improved ease of portability was solving a problem that did not exist for some respondents, who were happy with their current arrangements.

Commentary on analysis of focus groups: sunglasses sector

The analysis of the group discussions on the potential application of the new products in the sunglasses market was interesting on two counts. First, opposing camps of opinion concerning the product emerged, one for and one against the utility value of the design. Gordon and Langmaid (1988) have noted this feature of focus groups, and comment that it is a strength of the technique to highlight differences, and to allow the researcher to assess a range of attitudes. In both groups, the anti-respondents prevailed, and it was interesting to observe the resolution of tension by passivity on the part of the pro lobby. In order to improve group harmony, the negative lobby was prepared to offer modified views, which itself questions how strongly the negative views were held.

The second interesting aspect was the power of Italian origin of the design. When this fact was revealed towards the end of the discussions, it provided a shock to the negative view-holders, who had argued against the product on grounds of taste and style which are strong perceived characteristics of Italian products. This gave support to the pro lobby, with the result that the group ultimately converged around a more positive view. Demonstrating the power of convergence of opinions in a group situation, this suggests that the final opinion given was more a consensus group decision rather than a reflection of the variety of individual responses within the group. This conclusion supports the views of Bloom (1989) and Krueger and Casey (2000) who expressed concern that groups exhibit a tendency to converge around a norm which obscures the spread of opinion within the group.

Consumer behaviour in this market was felt to be more a function of positive personal self-perceptions (the desire to look your best) rather than functionality (the need to protect your eyes or see more in sunlight). Actual usage of sunglasses was rationalised by functionality, but there was little other than the vaguest generalities to support this view. The look of the glasses was felt to be the key motivation. The anti-lobby created a climate of criticism of cheapness, which seemed to permeate the group decision-making, particularly in the early stages. However, when questioned individually, respondents indicated acceptance of a significantly higher price than the group had agreed upon if they felt a particular model suited them. This indicates that the group discussion had effectively hidden a spectrum of views on this topic by moving quickly to a consensus, which as Hedges (1985) and Fern (2001) noted can condition responses artificially.

Commentary on analysis of individual depth interviews: sunglasses sector

In the individual interviews, probing whether the look was really the only significant discriminator between alternative products revealed that the functional performance of sunglasses did play a significant, if secondary, role. This supports the comments of Gibbs (1997) who argues that the interviewer needs to challenge respondents' views in order to draw out deeper shades of meaning. Functionality, in terms of the ability of a pair of sunglasses to protect the eyes from exposure to the sun, was observed to be an important, although secondary, part of the buying process. This led to the revelation of

a hitherto unsuspected potential benefit for the product range. The new products can perhaps promote eye health because their ease of portability made them more likely to be to hand when the occasion warrants, and therefore, more likely to be used. The intricacy of the logic within these conclusions supported the view that individual depth interviews provide a real depth and clarity of data (Robson and Foster, 1989; Cassell and Symon, 2004).

Discussion and conclusions

Both research techniques identified the central issues across both market segments, which were:

- claimed and underlying motivations for usage;
- primary components of the buying process;
- the power of the “look” as a buying motivation, which can transcend brand and price considerations; and
- the significant impact of Italian origins.

In addition, there was significant convergence of results between the two techniques in other less central areas, such as the perceived target markets, and the advice given on the brand name. It was interesting that these commonalities generally held true across two different product categories, with different respondents participating in each, which lends an element of robustness to this observation of similarities.

Differences between the findings of the two research techniques were also observed. Deeper attitudinal data was felt to be closed off in the focus groups, yet was accessible in the individual depth interviews. An example of this is the issue of the link between resistance to optical glasses and associations with the wearer’s own mortality. The individual depth interviews also appeared to give a more rounded consideration to the potential of the products, because the perception of cheapness did not become the dominating issue as it did in the focus groups through the group effect.

Group processes appeared to provide a breadth of information that was not evident from the individual depth interviews, such as the information that ready-made reading glasses are a “toe in the water” step into the market for optical glasses. Group processes were felt to be providing a strong momentum towards consensus. This was particularly evident in the sunglasses groups where a split of opinion was ultimately resolved by the passivity of one of the sides. There was further evidence within the groups that the group’s consensus view was substantially different from the views held by some group members.

The analysis of post-focus group and individual depth interviews is particularly revealing of the effect of group processes. All respondents began the process of reflection on the groups by declaring that they were in close agreement with the group view, that they had not been swayed by the opinions of others, and that they had spoken out when they disagreed. It should be emphasised that respondents were categorical in this respect. Detailed questioning revealed this not to be the case in most instances (which was confirmed by listening again to the audio tapes of the relevant focus groups). Respondents were asked to comment on a wide range of views that had been put forward by the group, and extensive disagreement to these points typically emerged, little of which had been shared with the group.

Respondents also believed that others in the group had agreed with a general view just to be polite, and admitted that they had often done the same. It was not the case that individual responses were set in stone at an early stage of the group, and were then highly resistant to change. Rather it was that personal filters were applied to the ebb and flow of the discussion, with relevant views and information potentially becoming incorporated in an individual's personal perspective. However, the evidence from this sample does suggest that this is somewhat of a personal process, and only parts of the development of an opinion are revealed to the rest of the group.

Potential and pitfalls of using focus groups and individual interviews

In summary, this research investigated the relative potential of focus groups and individual interviews to fulfil a number of research requirements. The results are shown in the Table I.

Both methods demonstrated their potential to identify the key motivations and processes at work amongst buyer groups. They also proved equally capable of identifying target markets for the proposed products. They differed in their ability to identify the spread of opinions as the individual interview revealed some views unexpressed in the groups. The groups provided a consensus view that allows conclusions to be drawn more easily from the research, but with the potential pitfall that these may be invalid if the group effect has over-ridden key issues. Whilst the interviews offered more depth and clarity in the data collected, the groups provided more breadth and contextual information. However, the interviews allowed the researcher to perceive more attitudinal subtleties in relation to buyer behaviour.

This research revealed two particular pitfalls in using focus groups as a qualitative research method:

- (1) Whilst focus groups were able accurately to identify the principal issues, they were unable to match the depth and detail relating to those issues that individual interviews were able to provide. It is felt that this level of data could be critical to the definition of an effective marketing strategy. For example, it would have appeared valid to conclude from the focus group research alone that a potential strategy would be to aim the optical glasses at first time glass wearers. The ready-made reading glasses appeared to fit with a consumer characteristic of easing their way into the market with this type of product. However, only the individual depth interviews revealed the deep-rooted nature of consumer resistance to becoming glass wearers, and also the intensity of this

Potential of each research method to:	Focus Group	Interview
Identify central buying motivations	Yes	Yes
Identify key buying processes	Yes	Yes
Identify target markets	Yes	Yes
Qualify brand name	Yes	Yes
Identify spread and extent of opinions	Incomplete	Yes
Provide a consensus view	Yes	No
Offer depth and clarity of data	Incomplete	Yes
Offer breadth of data and contextual information	Yes	Incomplete
Uncover subtleties in attitudes	Incomplete	Yes

Table I.
Comparison of the
research potential of
groups and interviews

resistance due to its connection with the wearer's own mortality. It could be argued, therefore, that a strategy aimed at first time glass wearers would have a considerable amount of antipathy to overcome, and would therefore, be less likely to succeed.

- (2) The group processes can act to obscure the identification of the range of beliefs, attitudes and motivations, due to group pressures which lead to a consensus view. Such pressures were indicated by the convergence of opinion around a general negative perception of cheapness, which was subsequently revealed to be at odds with the views of individual respondents. The same pressures were also observed in the sunglasses focus groups where a split of opinion was resolved by apparently passive acceptance on the part of one side, whilst in reality, private disagreement appeared to be maintained.

The second stage of the research, which specifically studied group pressures, endorsed the concern that consensus views may differ considerably from the individual views held by respondents (Bloom, 1989; Fern, 2001). This research also indicated a further difficulty in validating consensus viewpoints reached by groups, by indicating that respondents seemed unaware of the inconsistencies between their personal views and their part-ownership of the collective views of the group.

Individual depth interviews are structurally free from group pressures, and they demonstrated in this comparative study the ability to get under the surface and expose important attitudinal data. The research did, however, expose a relative weakness of individual depth interviews in that they were unable to provide the rich contextual information on consumers' relationships with the products themselves which was apparent in the focus group findings. An example of this was the insight focus groups gave on the power of Italian provenance in the sunglasses focus groups, which is such that it was even able to cause respondents to doubt their own taste and judgement. It was felt that group processes acted positively here to extract this level of information, in the manner suggested by Albrecht *et al.* (1993).

The final conclusion is, therefore, that each of the qualitative research methods examined was able to demonstrate particular strengths and weaknesses. Individual depth interviews would appear to be more appropriate for research situations where there is a specific, well-defined issue to investigate which calls for a detailed understanding of consumer perspectives, whereas focus groups are perhaps more applicable to wide-ranging exploratory research. Individual depth interviews demonstrated a superior ability to get at the important underlying issues that can shape effective marketing strategy. As many marketing-related research designs require this level of inquiry, this study, therefore, concludes that the individual depth interview method merits serious consideration as a potentially superior alternative technique to the more popular focus groups.

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Corresponding author

David Stokes can be contacted at d.stokes@kingston.ac.uk

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