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THE FOCUS GROUP, A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

Reviewing The theory, and Providing Guidelines to Its Planning [1]

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Abstract

The *Focus Group* (*FG*) has been actually employed by marketing, and is becoming importanct also in other areas; such as, education, health, management, decision-making, and information systems, among others. Depending on the research objective, the *Focus Group* can be used alone or in conjunction with other methods. The results obtained from the *FG* application are particularly effective in supplying information about how people think, feel, or act regarding a specific topic. This paper aims to review the literature, discussing characteristics, forms, phases, and applic ation procedures of the *Focus Group*. In so doing, this paper may present some useful guidelines to researchers and managers who intend to use this technique in their projects.

Keywords: *Focus Group*, qualitative research, group interview, data collection

1 This is a working-paper prepared in cooperation between the ISRC (Information Systems Research Group, University of Baltimore, USA) and the GESID (Grupo de Estudos em Sistemas de Informação e Apoio à Decisão), a research group from the School of Management (PPGA/UFRGS, Brazil), coordinated by Professor Henrique Freitas, whose focus is a literature review mainly prepared by Doctoral student Mirian Oliveira. This work is part of a research project and is supported by several Brazilian Government Research Agencies (CNPq, Fapergs, Propesp/UFRGS and CAPES/COFECUB), by FULBRIGHT (USA), and by the ISRC/Univ. of Baltimore (Maryland, USA).

THE *FOCUS GROUP*, A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

Reviewing The theory, and Providing Guidelines to Its Planning

1. INTRODUCTION: How do people consider an experience, idea, or event?

The answer to the question "How do people consider an experience, idea, or event?" demands the application of some technique or method that concerns each person's reality. What can be done easily by gathering people into groups, creating environmental conditions for more spontaneous expression of each one, and facilitating the interaction of everybody. The *Focus Group* (*FG*) is one of the qualitative research methods to be utilized in the search for answers to such questions.

The origin of the *Focus Group* was in sociology. Now, *FG* is used intensely in the marketing field, and also, it has been growing in popularity in aother areas. In social science, Robert Merton published the first work using *Focus Group*. Paul Lazarsfeld and others later introduced this technique in marketing (Morgan, 1988). Tull and Hawkins (1993) studied this subject.

Focus Group is a type of in-depth interview accomplished in a group, whose meetings present characteristics defined with respect to the proposal, size, composition, and interview procedures. The focus or object of analysis is the interaction inside the group. The participants influence each other through their answers to the ideas and contributions during the discussion. The moderator stimulates discussion with comments or subjects. The fundamental data produced by this technique are the transcrips of the group discussions and the moderator's reflections and annotations.

The general characteristics of the *Focus Group* are people's involvement, a series of meetings, the homogeneity of participants with respect to research interests, the generation of qualitative data, and discussion focused on a topic, which is determined by the purpose of the research. These characteristics are presented in detail in Section 4.

This FG research method is advisable for generating ideas for investigation or action in new fields; for generating hypotheses based on the perception of the participants; to evaluate different research situations or study populations; to develop drafts of interviews and questionnaires; to supply interpretations of the participants' results from initial studies; and for generating additional information for a study on a wide scale.

In some situations, it is not advisable to use *Focus Groups* as a research method. For example, (1) when the subject is constraining the participants; (2) when the researcher does not have control of the critical aspects of the study; (3) when there are necessary statistical projections; (4) when other methods can produce results with better quality or more economically; or (5) when the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality of the information.

A test to verify the adequacy of *Focus Groups* consists of asking how active and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest in the research (Morgan, 1988). *FG* is particularly suited to be used when the objective is to understand better how people consider an experience, idea, or event, because the discussion in the *FG* meetings is effective in supplying information about what people think, or how they feel, or on the way they act.

The goal of this working paper is to describe potential uses of the *Focus Group*, its advantages and disadvantages as a qualitative research method (Section 2); the use of *FG* in conjunction with other research methods (Section 3); to discuss important aspects of the conduct of research that uses this qualitative research method, and to present the stages for executing it (Section 4). Some final considerations are presented in Section 5.

2. *FOCUS GROUP* AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD: Advantages and Disadvantages

The research in management, especially in marketing, frequently considers *Focus Group* and other qualitative methods as exploratory tools, its results needing to be verified by a quantitative study, in a representative sample. From the point of view of a researcher in the social sciences, *FG* is usable alone or as a complement to quantitative research methods.

Now, in the social sciences, the two main means of collecting qualitative data are the individual interview and the observation of participants in groups. *Focus Group* combines elements of these two approaches by interviewing participants in groups.

The application of the *FG* technique, allows us to collect an appropriate amount of data in a short period of time, although we cannot argue with full conviction about the spontaneity of the contributions from the participants. Nevertheless, some of the information gathered during a *FG* session potentially will be of great worth, because it will be collected with great difficulty through the simple observation of reality.

FG permits a richness and a flexibility in the collection of data that are not usually achieved when applying an instrument individually; at the same time permitting spontaneity of interaction among the participants. On the other hand, FG demands a better preparation of the place itself (where it will happen), as well as more elaboration of the results, since we will probably collect less data than individual interview. Figure 1 presents the advantages and disadvantages of the *Focus Group* in relation to other research methods.

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
• It is comparatively easier to drive or conduct • It allows to explore topics and to generate hypotheses • It generates opportunity to collect data from the group interaction, which concentrates on the topic of the researcher's interest • It has high "face validity" (data) • It has low cost in relation to other methods • It gives speed in the supply of the results (in terms of evidence of the meeting of the group) • It allows the researcher to increase the size of the sample of the qualitative studies	• It is not based on a natural atmosphere • The researcher has less control over the data that are generated • It is not possible to know if the interaction in group he/she contemplates or not the individual behavior • The data analysis are more difficult to be done. The interaction of the group forms a social atmosphere and the comments should be interpreted inside of this context • It demands interviewers carefully trained • It takes effort to assemble the groups • The discussion should be conducted in an atmosphere that facilitates the dialogue

Figure 1 - Advantages and disadvantages of the *Focus Group*.
Source: based on Krueger (1994) and Morgan (1988).

In spite of the disadvantages enumerated above (especially the subject of spontaneity and the effort required to assemble the groups), the application of this method facilitates the collection of interesting data. This data contributes to a stronger conviction on the part of the researcher or analyst, as it is a good source of information for the formulation of hypotheses or for the construction of frameworks. These in turn allow further investigation.

Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of *Focus Group* compared to other research methods, its potential use in the research design will be shown.

3. THE USE OF ***FOCUS GROUP*** *IN THE RESEARCH DESIGN*

The goal of a *Focus Group* is to have the participants understand the topic of interest to the researcher, irrespective of its use, alone or together with other research methods. As discussed previously, *FG* may be considered as much a stand-alone research method as one used in conjunction with other methods.

As a stand-alone method, *FG* can be used in order to explore new areas of research or to examine subjects well-known to the participants. Together with other methods, it can be used for preliminary research, or to prepare specific subjects in a large project; or even to illuminate the results of other data.

More and more, the researchers are recognizing the advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods (Freitas, Cunha and Moscarola, 1996; Stumpf and Freitas, 1996), resulting "methodological mix" that strengthen the drawing of the research. In this context, *Focus Group* (Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1994; and Greenbaum, 1993):

- **can precede a quantitative research method.** In this case, it helps the researcher to learn the vocabulary of a field and to discover the public thought, in addition to supplying indications of special problems that can arise in the next phase using a quantitative research method.
- **can be used at the same time as quantitative research method.** In this case, the objective is triangulation; that is, the use of two or more different methods, in a complementary way, for the same research subject.
- **can follow a quantitative research method.** In this case, *Focus Groups* can explore or to illuminate topics that have emerged in the analysis of the results of the quantitative research method.

Finally, it can be affirmed that the objective of the *FG* application defines its role in the research design. In the following items, strongly based in Morgan (1988), some of the reasons for combining *Focus Group* with other research methods are introduced.

3.1 *Focus group* and the individual interview

Focus Group can contribute to a project built around the Individual Interview, especially in the planning phase of the interview route. In this case, the idea is to use a small number of exploratory groups, in an initial stage of the research, to guide the construction of the topics of the interview. This application is especially useful when the topic or the population have not been studied extensively in the past or when the researcher is new to the field.

The advantage of the duration of the *Focus Group* compared to the Individual Interview is that the researcher can also compare results among different groups of participants. The use of the *Focus Group* will provide a base to select the groups for more detailed interviews.

Another form of combining the *Focus Group* with the Individual Interview is to make an additional interview with the group as a whole. This would allow the researcher to explore topics that have appeared in the analysis of the interviews and to illuminate areas that seem yet to have a point of view without consensus.

3.2 *Focus group* and participant observation

The main aid that *Focus Group* has to offer for a project based on participant observation is the perception of the participants' thoughts concentrated on the topic object of the investigation, in a very smaller time. This can be especially useful in the beginning of a new project, as a means of supplying typical experiences in the field and perspectives from which they will be observed.

FG can be used preceding the participant observation, as an auxiliary to the selection among alternative situations to accomplish the participant observation. Still, at the conclusion of a certain amount of participant observations, *FG* can be used to compare the observations registered. This will require additional meetings with those involved in each of the observation situations.

3.3 *Focus group* and surveys

Some researchers recommend the use of *Focus Group* in the conception of questionnaires. The most obvious way that *FG* can help in the construction of the questionnaire is providing evidences of the respondents who would be attuned to the topic. Its most important use preceding a survey is to allow the researcher to be (more) sure that he or she has a complete picture of the participants' thoughts.

In addition to the preliminary and exploratory phases of the research survey, *Focus Group* can also be used to familiarize the researcher and participants with the topic: for example, if the language of the topic is a problem, then it will be advisable to set up a group to discuss the crucial items on the questionnaire before the pre-test in field. One of the advantages of using *FG* for the pre-test is the ease in detecting that the participants did not understand the subject as the researcher understands it. Pre-testing with *Focus Groups* not only identifies such problems, but helps to solve them.

In the advanced stages of the survey, when the data have already been collected, and the analysis has begun, *Focus Groups* can serve as an additional venue for data collection, looking to explore aspects of the data analysis. This can be especially important when the results are puzzling to the researcher.

3.4 *Focus group* and experiments

Although it does not exist practically, any recognition of the potential value of *Focus Groups* in experimental research constitutes, in fact, one of the main applications of the experimental research of Merton (apud Morgan, 1988). Similarly, *Focus Group,* in association with the *Survey* method, in the development of the instrument, preliminary *FG* can be used to define “manipulations” of the independent variable and to measure the dependent variables associated with an experiment.

Focus Groups can also be useful as an effective substitute for speculation, in the attempt to explain abnormal results. Another advantage of combining *FG* and experiments is that we can better understand or have a better interpretation of how effects operate. As it happens, when the *Focus Group* is combined with other methods, the objective is to compare the researcher's interpretation of the event with the participants' interpretations.

4. *FOCUS GROUP* STAGES

This section describes HOW to utilize *Focus Groups* and WHAT to do with the data that they produce.

Focus Groups can be executed in three stages: planning (Section 4.1); conduct of the interviews (Section 4.2) and analysis of the data (Section 4.3). The planning is critical for *Focus Group* success because, in this phase, the researcher considers the intent of the study and the users of the information, besides developing a plan that will guide the remainder of the research process, including the elaboration of the subjects and the participants' selections. The interview phase consists of the moderation of the meetings. After the sessions, in the analysis phase, they take the transcripts of the meetings, evaluate them and articulate them in a report.

4.1 Planning for *Focus Group*

Care with the planning of the *Focus Group* does not guarantee good results, but an inattentive approach to the design and execution will very probably produce poor results! The two more obvious factors affecting the ability to plan *Focus Groups* are the time budget and the dollar budget (Morgan, 1988).

Initially, it is necessary to obtain consensus with respect to the nature of the problem and with respect to the necessary types of information relevant to the problem. This will facilitate verifying whether the *Focus Group* is a suitable method for the conduct of the research.

The planning begins with reflecting on the purpose of the meetings. The researcher ponders such questions as:

- "Why should such a study be conducted?
- What types of information will be produced?
- What types of information are of particular importance?
- How will this information be used?
- Who wants this information?" (Krueger, 1994).

The answers to these questions are then organized in a logical way.

With the purpose of the *Focus Group* in mind, the researcher turns attention to operational questions such as:

- “How do I locate the participants?
- How are people in this general category alike or different?
- What incentives are needed, if any?
- Where would be the best place to hold the discussion?
- What would be some good questions to ask?
- What kind of person should moderate?” (Krueger, 1994).

In *Focus Group* planning, a chronological plan should be developed, including the following activities: development of the subjects, identification of the participants' characteristics, drafting a list of the potential participants, recruiting the participants, conduct of the meetings, *feedback* from the planning, transcription, analysis and composition of the report. Figure 2 presents an example of a chronological plan.

TIME ALLOCATED FOR THE SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES				
Planning		Interviews	Analysis	
week 1	week 2 to 4	weeks 5 to 6	weeks 7 to 14	weeks 15 to 18
• to develop the plan				
	• to elaborate the questions • to identify the participants • to define the place of the sessions • to recruit			
		• 1st session • *feedback of the planning* • 2nd session • 3rd session	• to transcribe • to process data • to analyze the data	
				• to write the report

Figure 2 - Example of chronological plan.
Source: adapted of Krueger, 1994.

The following paragraphs present, in more detail, characteristics to be considered in the planning phase of the *Focus Group:* The number and size of the groups (Section 4.1.1), the participants (Section 4.1.2), the level of involvement of the moderator (Section 4.1.3), the interview content (Section 4.1.4), and selection of the place and data collection (Section 4.1.5).

4.1.1 The number and size of the groups

The number of groups is one of the first topics of the planning phase to be discussed because the group is the main unit of analysis in the *Focus Group* research method. That is true in a statistical sense, also, in a practical sense. The marketing researchers vary the number of groups as a function of which meetings are or are not producing new ideas. If the moderator clearly can predict what will be said in the next group, then the research is concluded. This usually happens after the third or fourth session (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988; and Greenbaum, 1993).

An important determinant of the number of groups is the number of different subgroups of populations required by the research. The more homogeneous the groups in terms of background and perspectives, the smaller the number of groups needed. It should be made clear that a single group is never enough. Besides, it can be separated in groups with different segments of the existent population. A single group should not be used because the moderator can come across a "cold" group, where the participants are quiet, reluctant to participate, not reacting to the moderator's incentives, and also, because they can happen not to be representative due to the influence of some inflamatory comment of some participant or other internal or external factors to the meeting.

With respect to the number of participants in the sessions, the usual approach is to use groups of moderate size, six to ten people. In marketing today, the researchers favor groups of six to eight people, while many years ago, the optimum number was thought to be eight to ten people. When prescribing the size of the *Focus Group*, it should be pondered that the group be small enough that everybody has an opportunity to share his perceptions, and big enough to provide diversity of perceptions (Oppenhein, 1993; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988; and Mattar, 1994).

When the number of members exceeds twelve, it is advisable to divide the group. In small groups the researcher can identify the thought on each participant's topic, although he runs the risk of being less productive and more expensive. With larger groups, it increases the difficulty of managing the group, usually demanding more involvement of the moderator, with a bigger challenge to maintain discipline, and mainly, to inhibit parallel chats.

It can be said, as a function of these arguments, that the minimum number of people in the *Focus Group* would be four and a maximum would be twelve. It is appropriate to summon about 20% more than the minimum to assure that at least the minimum number will appear. This percentile may vary depending upon where the sessions are conducted, who the participants are, and the importance of the size of the group for the research design. If all of the people invited for the session attend, considering that a larger number of participants is recruited than is necessary, the extra people may be asked to answer the questions in another room. Such situation applies when we do not have real conditions to accomplish the sessions in parallel: maybe we do not have the infrastructure we could need, or even we do not have moderator for such a task. Still, we should consider if yes or not this last group would be formed appropriately.

4.1.2 The participants

The determination of who will participate in the study is a function of the purpose of the research. The need to segment the people in categories should be considered. The usual demographic factors are: geographical location, age, size of the family, status, gender, etc.

A routine problem in determining the composition of the group is the decision to mix different participants; e.g., heterogeneous groups of buyers and sellers; or to form different groups for each category; e.g., homogeneous groups of only buyers and only sellers. The problem appears as a function of the need to maintain a reasonable homogeneity inside the group in order to encourage discussion. The most general advice on that is each participant should have something to say on the topic and to feel comfortable speaking with the others (Morgan, 1988). Note that this does not mean that the participants should have the same perspective on the topic; on the contrary, if this was the case, the discussion would be not so productive.

The discriminating factors most often used in the formation of groups are: age group, gender, ethnic group, and social class. If the researcher opts to separate the groups, it is better to consider four sessions for each category of the discriminating factor. For example, four sessions with feminine gender and four sessions with masculine gender. In other words, each category will have its own *Focus Group*. This strategy can be expanded to include a direct comparison also among discussions of separate categories and discussions that combine participants' categories. For example, with two categories (feminine and masculine, as exemplified) we would have three *Focus Groups* and twelve sessions: four feminine, four masculine, and four mixed. An alternative mixing the categories, is to use a mixed group for pre-test. If the participants do not differ significantly, there will be little reason to separate the groups.

When selecting the participants, the issue is the bias of the sample, which is not the same as reliability. It is advisable "to concentrate on those segments of the population that are capable of provide more significant information" (Morgan, 1988). In this way, the researcher should take care not to interpret the results as being representative of the universe.

A final decision is whether to use strangers or acquaintances in a group. The general rule is that it is better to work with strangers. Usually, people who know each other, socially or professionally, have difficulty concentrating on the topic, and they may also be inhibited from expressing their perceptions.

Recruiting participants can consume plenty of time when specialized populations or experimental designs are used. A questionnaire should be developed for recruiting participants. This instrument should have about four to six questions, to determine whether the participant possesses the indispensable characteristics to participate in the sessions.

4.1.3 The level of moderator involvement

The level of the moderator's involvement is always treated as a *continuum:* at one extreme, it is low, where the moderator has a small part in the group discussion; and at the other extreme, it is high, where the moderator controls the topics that are discussed and the dynamics of the discussion.

The researchers should identify what they want to produce as an outcome of the interviews and then decide on the moderator's involvement in line with these objectives. Low involvement is important for objectives that emphasize exploratory research, and also when the objectives include content analysis. Alternatively, high involvement levels are more appropriate when an ambitious agenda is to be executed; for example, to compare the thought of new groups of participants with what has been found in previous sessions. If the objectives of the research do not supply a definitive answer, then the attention is turned to the pros and cons of involvement intensity.

One of the most obvious problem of high involvement is that the moderator's bias will produce data that reproduce this bias. A point in favor of high involvement is the ability to curtail non-productive discussions and to promote the topic greatest interest to the researcher. High involvement also has the characteristic of assuring that the desired topics are covered. Finally, it allows everyone to take part in the discussion, depending on the homogeneity level among the participants.

The most important advantage of low involvement of the moderator is the ability to evaluate the participants' interests This can show the participants naturally organize their discussions around the same topics as the researcher. The biggest disadvantage of low involvement of the moderator is that these groups are relatively disorganized with respect to content. They are more difficult to analyze, and this is even more evident in large groups.

Implicit in this whole discussion is the use of more moderators to conduct the sessions. Although it is preferable to use a single moderator, this is not possible, nor desirable, in large projects. In this case, it is advisable that the first, or the first two, sessions are conducted by a senior moderator and attended by others, and that this senior moderator attends the other moderators' first session (Krueger, 1994).

The researcher should contemplate the degree of the moderator's involvement because, if he is thinking of a highly structured format, he should think of doing individual interviews. On the other hand, if the format is not highly structured, then the researcher should consider participant observation.

4.1.4 The interview content

Merton (apud Morgan, 1988) presents four aspects to be observed in a *Focus Group* interview. They are: (1) to cover the maximum number of important topics; (2) to provide as specific as possible data; (3) to promote interaction that explores the participants' feelings in some depth; and (4) to take into account the personal context in which the participants generated their responses to the topic.

The topics of the discussion are carefully elaborated, based on the analysis of the situation. The objective here is to build an interview that covers the topic, while it supplies observations that satisfy the wide demand of an effective *Focus Group*. The most obvious restriction of the content of the interview is the duration of the session, between one and two hours. It would be interesting to drift for one hour and thirty minutes, but to say to the participants that it will last two hours.

A list of topics or a line of questioning may be used to conduct the sessions. The topic guide lists words or sentences that remind the moderator of the topics of interest. This approach seems more spontaneous for the participants and is more appropriate when the moderator treats all the sessions the same. Differing approaches may cause bias in the results. The same line of questions is used for a series of sessions with the aim of obtaining similar content, which allows more efficient analysis and eliminates language differences. Use of the topic guide is most appropriate when the moderator of the sessions is not always the same.

A *Focus Group* with high involvement of the moderator would be useful to organize the topics of a discussion which will proceed in a similar order for all the groups, as in an individual interview. The structure that the order imposes for the discussion is valuable to analyze the interaction of the group and to do comparisons among groups in the anaylsis phase of the research. A good order creates a natural progression among the topics, with some overlap among similar ones. An artificial division of the discussion may frustate the purpose of using group sessions. An additional benefit of designing an order would be to achieve consensus among the several members of the research team with respect to the topics covered and at a detail level.

The roster of topics is prepared starting from a list of subjects that should be discussed, which are organized in groups of topics and ordered in a logical sequence. The moderator should be careful not to proceed in a rigid way through the list, because this would be an inappropriate approach for a *Focus Group*.

The beginning of the sessions is similar, independent of the degree involvement adopted by the moderator. Initially, the moderator makes an introduction regarding the topic, in an honest and quite generic way. It can be interesting in the introduction for the moderator to tell what they are there to learn with everybody; but on the other hand, he should not fake ignorance of the subje ct.

During the introduction, the moderator presents some basic rules; such as: only one person speaks at a time; lateral chats should not take place; everybody should speak, etc. The members of the group should be told that the session will be recorded or filmed. The discussion begins with each participant introducing himself, which serves as an icebreaker. The latecomer can cause problems. For this reason, a simple rule would be not to include anybody that arrives after the end of the introductions.

The following stage will be the transition from the introduction to the discussion. The nature of the transition depends upon the level of the moderator's involvement.

- **Low level of involvement of the moderator.** He should present the first topic, which is followed by unstructured discussion, until the moderator introduces the second topic, and so forth.
- **High level of involvement of the moderator**. In this case, the order of the topic becomes very important. The initial topic, introduced by the moderator, is fundamental for the beginning of the discussion and should be a general question. Taking cues from the participants' discussion, the moderator will introduce the topics established on the roster.

The closing of the session also differs as a function of the level of the moderator's involvement:

- **Low level of involvement of the moderator.** The moderator returns to the discussion and offers a concluding statement.
- **High level of involvement of the moderator.** One way is for the moderator to request that each participant make a final statement.

The quality of the responses is directly related to the quality of the subjects. The questions are the essence of a *Focus Group* interview. They should seem spontaneous for the participants, but have been selected carefully and elaborated as a function of the expected information. Typically, an interview in a *Focus Group* will include about twelve questions. *Focus Group* subjects can be of several types, each one with its own purpose. The questions can be classified in the following categories (Krueger, 1994):

- **Opening questions.** The first round of questions allows a quick answer (10 to 20 seconds), and it enables identification of characteristics that the participants have in common.
- **Introductory questions.** Introductory questions introduce the general topic of discussion, and they provide the participants an opportunity to contemplate previous experiences.
- **Transition questions.** Transition questions move the conversation toward the key questions.
- **Key questions.** Key questions address the study. They usually vary of two to five questions, and they are the ones that require more attention and analysis.
- **Ending questions.** Ending questions close the discussion. They consider everything that was said until then. They allow the participants to consider all of the comments shared in the discussion and to identify which the most important ones.
- **Summary question.** The moderator summarizes in two to three minutes the key questions and main ideas that emerged during the discussion. After this, he asks the participants: “Was this an appropriate summary ?”
- **Final question.** Following the summary question, the moderator makes a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, and then he presents the final questions: “Did we forget something?” and “What advice would you have for us?” This is still more important since we are in the beginning of a number (series) of sessions.

In the elaboration of the questions, care should be taken (Krueger, 1994):

- to avoid dichotomous questions that can be answered with only a “yes” or “no”.
- to contemplate the open questions because they allow the respondents to choose the way to answer.
- to ponder on questions of the type “Why?” because they imply a rational answer, developed by thought and reflection.
- to avoid jargon, technical terms, or vocabulary specific to a group.

The prior use of brainstorming with colleagues and users of the information can be useful to obtain subjects and variations in the vocabulary. The pilot test of a *Focus Group* roster happens in the following way:

- Specialists revise the sequence of the questions to arrive at the most logical sequence for obtaining the desired information.
- Some of the target public comment on the subjects, taking care that they do not participate in the sessions.
- The first session can serve as a pilot test. If significant alterations are not made, the pilot can be considered in the analysis.
- The final question of the session “Did we forget something?” helps mainly in the first sessions to refine the roster of topics.

4.1.5 The place selection and data collection

Focus Groups have been conducted with success in several places; such as, restaurants, hotel rooms, public buildings, etc. However, here are some factors to consider when choosing a place:

- an easy location for the participants to find and to reach;
- free from distractions; large windows, doors with glass, music, etc.;
- to foster an appropriate disposition of the participants;
- equipped with audio and / or video facilities.

The participants should be seated at a U-shaped table, with each participant's name visible for the others, and with the moderator seated at the head of the table, in front of the participants. If the session is going to be filmed, the camera should be behind the moderator. The main method of obtaining the data is from the recording, which is fundamental to assure the quality of the data. The use of video presents advantages and disadvantages. The main purpose of using video is to determine who is speaking and to whom this participant is speaking.

The moderator and the moderator's assistant (observer) should make their annotations during the session, as well as recording their impressions soon after the end of the session. These annotations, although they are not part of the data of the session, will be part of the researcher's interpretation. The distinction between what the participants find interesting and what they find important is one of the aspects that should be considered by the researcher (Morgan, 1988b):

> “Compromising in the discussion of a topic is a good indication that the participants find the topic interesting, but not necessarily what they think is important.”

4.2 Conduct of the sessions

Not more than two hours a day or five hours a week are advised for the conduct of the sessions. A lot of people have the illusion that interviewing is a simple task, but actually it requires mental discipline, preparation, and ability to interaction with a group. *Focus Group* success depends on good questions formulated appropriately for the chosen respondents. Another essential ingredient is the moderator's ability to lead the discussion. Effective leadership is essential for the group to reach the proposed objective. The moderator should have the necessary ability to guide the group process, because it is not enough that he is in harmony with the proposal of the research.

The moderator should be comfortable and familiar with the group process. Previous experience in working with groups, or training in group dynamics is advisable. The moderator has to have the ability to make transitions from unimportant topics (introduced by the participants) to the main topic (or main focus), as well as to keep the group animated and interested in the subject. Further, the moderator should respect, and believe in the participants' good sense.

An assistant moderator can be used who will have more opportunity to make annotations than the moderator, because the assistant will be observing and registering the discussion without intervening, unless it is requested by the moderator. The moderator should place the topics on the roster, and, at the same time memorize the point of view of each one of the participants. This is a fundamental point for the conduct of the meeting and for the closing of same.

The moderator should not have a position of power or influence. Actually, he should encourage all types of comments--positive and negative. The interviewer (moderator) cannot make judgements on the responses and should be careful with his language, not to communicate approval or disapproval. It is not an easy task.

A *Focus Group* objective can be to suggest ideas, to illuminate potential options, to recommend a course of action, among others. When ambiguity exists around a *Focus Group* objective, difficulties appear in the conduct of the *Focus Group*. The lack of clarity in defining the proposal of the group can result in confusion, frustration, misunderstandings, loss of time, and wrong results.

The introduction of the discussion, including the welcome, the general vision of the topic, the rules of the meeting, and the first subject, should follow the same pattern in the several sessions. In the invitation phase, or in the beginning of the session, the following information should be given to the participants: why the session is happening, how the information will be used, and who is interested in it.

A *Focus Group* session is conducted more easily when the participants are homogeneous in certain aspects; such as cultural level, age group, etc. According to Krueger (1994), the existence of homogeneity among the participants should be reinforced by the moderator in the introduction of group discussion. A sentence that can be placed in the introduction to evidence this aspect can be:

> "We invited people with similar experiences to share their perceptions and ideas on this topic. You were selected because you possess certain characteristics in common, which are of interest to us" (Krueger, 1994).

The term *Focus Group* is rarely used in the sessions or during the recruitment of the participants, because the term can inhibit the participants' spontaneity. The social-demographic data can be reported by the participants before beginning the session.

4.3 The data analysis

Production of the transcriptions and the analysis thereof are a slow, time-consuming process. Depending on the number of groups, the participants' readiness, and the type of analysis intended for the transcripts, it can take up to six months. This task is laborious, because the group discussions are conducted several times, usually a minimum of three, with specific types of participants to identify tendencies and patterns in the participants' perceptions. Careful and systematic analysis of the discussions supplies signs of how a product, service, or opportunity is perceived.

The analysis should be systematic, verifiable, and focus on the topic of interest and with an appropriate degree of interpretation. Each session produces approximately 50 to 70 pages of transcripts and about 10 to 15 pages of field notes. In the analysis, the words and their meaning, the context in which the comments were made, the internal consistency, frequency, the extent of the comments, the specificity of the answers, and the importance of identifying the main ideas, all should be considered (Krueger, 1994).

The results obtained from a *Focus Group* are valid if the method has been used for a problem that is adopted for investigation. Typically, *Focus Group* has high "*face validity*"; that is, it measures what itintends to measure, and there is conviction or faith in the data collected. The people tell their perceptions on the topic, which cannot be so easily achieved in an individual interview or other form of data collection.

The researchers describe *Focus Group* results as exploratory and not suitable for projection to a larger population. For the analysis of *Focus Group* data, two basic forms are used:

- qualitative or ethnographic summary,
- systematic code through content analysis.

In the ethnographic approach, the direct citations of the group discussion are important, while in the content analysis, the numeric description of the data is valued. It should be pointed out that these two forms of analyses are not conflicting, but complementary, although greater emphasis is given to content analysis [2]. During the analysis, the researcher should have in mind that the unit of analysis is the group.

2 About content analysis and lexical analysis, we can found: KRIPPENDORFF (1980), GRAWITZ (1993), MOSCAROLA (1993, 1994), LEBART and SALEM (1994), GAVARD-PERRET and MOSCAROLA (1995), BARDIN (1996), FREITAS, CUNHA and MOSCAROLA, and SPHINX Léxica (1997).

Two strategies for the analysis can be adopted:

- Initially, it proceeds with detail analysis of one or two groups, developing hypotheses and coding outlines, which will be expanded with the data from other groups.
- A researcher examines the group and another concentrates on the differences among the discussions.

The recurrent process of developing hypotheses and coding outlines is more widely used in unstructured *Focus Groups*. In this case, the topics are not previously fixed on the roster, and consequently, the discussion can be conducted for any other topic or for a specific topic which can be approached in any point of the transcrips.

In the report of the research, the similarity of *Focus Group* with other qualitative research methods becomes more evident in absence of rigid rules. The report is usually comprised of a group of citations, summaries of discussions, tables, maps, or outlines; which present the basic information obtained from each one of the main topics of the discussion.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Focus Group is a qualitative research method whose application is mainly useful in the social sciences. It has been used in areas such as management, marketing, decision and information systems, among others. Its general characteristics stand out: the homogeneity of the group, the sequence of the sessions, the obtaining of qualitative data, and focus on a topic.

This research method can be used separately or in conjunction with other methods, to strengthen a research design. The three phases of a *Focus Group* are planning, conduct of the interviews, and analysis. Careful planning is fundamentally important.

This article focused mainly on details of the planning phase. Rescuing the theory, it gives an instrument to the researcher who wants to apply the *Focus Group* to his studies. An application of this technique involving management, information systems, decision-making, health, prescription, and medical, was reported by Stumpf and Freitas (1996).

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