



Focus Groups

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The following text gives an theoretical and practical introduction to the research method „Focus Group“, meant for the participants of the research methods training within the project “Focus Balkans”.

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1. Definition: Focus Groups

In the literature of the concerned disciplines (social sciences, market sciences, marketing), “focus groups”, “group interviews” and “group discussions” are neither systematically differentiated nor homogenously defined. Focus Groups are, in some cases, considered as synonymous to group discussions (e.g. Flick 1995) or, in other cases, as specific forms of group discussions (e.g. Morgan 1997).

These three techniques, in spite of a lacking taxonomy, can be characterized as a “*moderated discussions of a group of individuals on a given subject*”. A special criterion of a focus group is the narrowed focussing of a group discussion on a particular subject, implemented by an information input in forms of a presentation, pictures or objects (e. g. product samples).

Focus groups are characterised by two core elements. The subject matter is being introduced,, into the group, by the researcher and the generated data are a result of the interaction within the group. It is only the combination of these two criteria which discerns focus groups as a self-content research method between the two basic methods of qualitative data gathering methods: the open interview (of individuals) and the participating observation (of a group, without researcher input) (Bürki 2000).

The authors suggest, for the usage within the project “Focus Balkans”, the definition given above: “*A moderated discussion of a group of individuals on a given subject*”.

2. Theoretical Background

At first, we’re presenting a review of the (apparently scarce) literature on Focus Groups. Later (chapter 3) we will address practical questions.

2.1. Applicability and application of Focus Groups

A major advantage of focus groups is there flexibility. They can serve with regard different to contents as to functions: research objectives, instrumental aims from observation to validation of products). As well, the composition of participants can vary importantly.

As most of the qualitative research methods, Focus Groups are commonly used during the explorative stage within the research process, where they are particularly suited for the generation of hypotheses. Their capacity to validate hypotheses is relatively low (as it is the case with most qualitative methods).

Thus, Focus Groups were and are often used in the explorative stage of a quantitative research (as a preparatory study), but recently they are more and more used as a research method of its own (Morgan 1997).

2.2. The history of Focus groups

Focus groups have a long tradition, but the method's systematic description and development are coming up as lately as in the 1990ies. Before, Focus Groups were neglected in the methodological discussion and quite rarely used in a scientific context (see Morgan 1997).

Group discussions and more specifically Focus Groups have their origin in the Anglo-American region. First group discussions were used by Lewin (1936) within the context of socio-psychological small group experiments. At first, group process observation (leadership, interaction of participants) were in the centre of interest, later on content aspects were more and more centred on.

The scientific foundations of the usage of Focus Groups as a method of the social sciences were laid by the works of Merton and Kendall (1946). Their research was about the social and psychological effects of mass communication, especially with regard to the use of propaganda during World War II.

During the following decades, Focus Groups importance for the social sciences was limited. Nonetheless, they were discovered as an opportune method within the commercial market and opinion research, as they are easily and cheaply to use and because they permit to generate a huge panoply of information. But, in the commercial sector, no methodological progress was achieved during this period (Bürki 2000).

In the German speaking region, group discussions were at first taken up and discussed by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (Pollock, 1955 and Mangold, 1960; later on Niessen (1977) rediscovered the method.

In spite of the growing importance of qualitative approaches, Focus Groups play still a minor role in the methodological discussion of these decades. Only the boom on Focus groups in the USA brings about some methodological advancement, for example as a method within participative civil society dialogues (Dahinden 1998).

2.3. Data analysis

Focus Groups produce individual data and group-generated data, which can be analysed on different levels:

- On the relational level, where the group (the participants and their interaction) are in the centre of the consideration. Analysis based on: small group interaction, research on opinions and attitudes, interaction analysis.

- On the content level, when distinct statements are in the foreground.
Analysis based on: conversation analysis, content analysis.

The interpretation of Focus Groups is particularly difficult, due to the multitude and heterogeneity of the generated data. It has to be pointed out that until today there is no entirely satisfying and standardised analysis protocol for Focus Groups.

The content analysis is the most common analysis method (e. g. transcript analysis, Mayring, 1993).

2.4. Quality criteria and representativeness

Generally spoken, scientific methods have to fulfil two quality criteria: reliability (soundness of results; results have to be reproducible) and validity (relevance and coherence) (Steinke 2007, Riege 2007).

In qualitative social research, distances are taken with regard to both criteria, and especially with reliability and its request for reproducibility. Identical reproduction of qualitative research is utterly impossible, as a discussion or an open interview necessarily will necessarily differ with every reiteration.

The question, whether and to which extent the results of Focus Groups can be generalized is still unanswered.

But, in most cases, representativeness is not even within the objectives of Focus Groups. Especially in explorative research, general validity is not looked for, but a more exhaustive view on a highly specific topic is needed (Bürki 2000).

The representativeness of Focus Groups is, thus, object to controversy. On the one hand it is put forward that Focus Groups are limited to the generating of hypotheses that have to be confirmed by quantitative research (e.g. standardized survey) (Friedrichs 1990). On the other hand, Focus groups are directly used as a method of data collecting (e. g. Morgan 1997).

Unfortunately, only a very small number of researches have been carried out in order to verify the representativeness of Focus Groups. Nonetheless, these few studies still confirm that Focus Groups reflect correctly trends and tendencies that can be found in larger societal entities. Ward et al. (1991) show in a comparative study on Focus Groups and other methods (surveys), that in almost 90 % of the variables results were similar.

The quality of results depends on the number of realized Focus Groups. The number of Focus Groups should at least permit a theoretical saturation, a complete coverage of the topic (this is reached, when an additional Focus Group does not bring about any further new information).

Of course, all quantitative analysis or interpretation based on quantitative observations (percentage of answers, of opinions, of statements) is quite useless.

To sum up, we can conclude with regard to the quality of Focus Groups and with regard to their representativeness (Bürki 2000):

- Focus Groups fulfil scientific quality criteria within the domain of the qualitative social sciences
- Focus Groups do not only bring about explorative information, but can as well reveal trends of general validity
- Focus groups and individual interviews can bring about different results. This difference is logic with regard to methodology and often wanted.
- Focus Group projects have to reveal their research design, the conducting mode and the analysis method in order to render themselves credible, appraisable and comparable.

2.5. Weaknesses and restrictions

The following points have to be kept in mind when preparing, projecting, planning, conducting and interpreting Focus Groups (Anonymous, 2009).

- The moderator of the Focus Group has a central position and can, eventually, have a negative influence on the conduction and the results of the discussion (see chapter 3.2 and 3.4.5)
- Negative group effects: dominant participants or other participants with a strong impact can influence the direction of the discussion and discomfort the other participants. (see chapter 3.2 and 3.4.5)
- Results are not representative (and are not meant to be). As participants are often chosen by convenient sampling, a distortion of results is fairly possible. (see chapter 3.1)

Analysis and interpretation have to take these limits and weaknesses carefully into account.

3. Practical Aspects

We've seen above that the quality of Focus Group research depends very much on the thoroughness of their practical implementation. The following chapter gives examples and overall guidelines.

3.1. Sampling and representativeness

Focus groups discussion is a method to get qualitative information about consumer behaviour. Just as most of the other qualitative methods, Focus Groups are not meant to fulfil representativeness of a given population of individuals, but try to reflect the different possible ideas, opinions, and perceptions

If it does not seek to be representative with regard to a population, the Focus Group will, of course, adapt its composition to the subject matter.

For example, if we want to test a new packaging for a product devoted to teenagers or, on the contrary, to seniors, it would be better to have a focus group discussion of teenagers or seniors.

On the other hand, it is possible to constitute groups with one different characteristic: for example groups in different countries or different ways of life (rural/urban; single/ married people). The results of the different groups will be analyzed by taking into account the difference.

Therefore, we have to take into account the specificity of the subject/ product/ concept of the research for the constitution of the group.

Very often, groups are set up with « general population » and we try to get a good gender ratio, age balance and different socio-professional groups (education level, occupation).

The participants must not know each other; this could hinder the social interaction, lead to directed answers and consequently results distortion.

Recruiting is done by means of a short questionnaire about socio-demographic criteria (sex, age, education, profession) that contains as well a "filter question" in order to make sure that participants consume or at least know the product / topic of the research or are familiar with it (e. g. "Do you usually consume olive oil?", "Do you eat fish?").

This helps to control, in the same time, the influence of specific health factors (diabetics, allergies), eating habits (vegetarian, vegan) or religion (cashier, halal).

3.2. Focus Group Guidelines

There is no a single way to conceive a guideline for a Focus Group discussion. The guideline will be adapted to each case and can be different according to the persons who imagine them.

We can hope however that the main ideas will appear and be expressed, independently of the guideline, if it is well structured, complete and logic.

The focus group can be very different, depending on what we have to test. The guideline will be quite different if we test a real product or a concept:

We can just have a discussion with a set of questions to be answered. Each question is discussed by the group. The aim is to give a support to the interactivity of the group. All the ideas and opinions can thus emerge.

Different tools: pictures, packaging, videos, products etc. can be shown, to elicit reactions. Consumers react and express their preferences or dislikes.

At least, indirect methods can be used such as games or specific exercises.

Precise answers can be asked for: which product do consumers prefer? What are their consuming habits of a given product group (for example organic product) which is their level of knowledge on such or such subject (for example quality labels).

In some cases, we have particularly to better understand the image of a product or the position of consumers towards a societal theme (sustainable development, nuclear, animal welfare, biodiversity...). In this case the guidelines are less easy to conceive and the use of indirect methods can be very interesting.

Focus group discussion, for the cases studies of the project will be rather structured and different from creativity groups. Creativity groups gives more place to generating new ideas and are often less structured.

3.3. Practical Examples

Two examples of our practical work are given here.

3.3.1. Example 1: Focus Groups on "Tunisian Dates" (GEM)

The methodologies of the guidelines are often quite different according to the subject.

We present hereafter an example of a Focus group discussion guideline related to a dried fruit (Tunisian date).

The guide line is structured according to the following phases:

- Projective Universe

- Cognitive Universe
- Tasting
- Propositions and suggestions

It is an approach “in funnel”: a large approach in the beginning, then narrowing on some points, by questions concerning facts (what product do you buy, how many times a year...).

A phase of tasting and evaluation of the product can follow the discussion.

Generally at the end of the discussion, a more open discussion on certain themes can be proposed, in a more creative way: expectations, new proposals...

Projective universe

We generally, begin with an approach of the **global universe** of the product: spontaneous associations with a general theme given ; We call it projective product **Universe**

This gives a view of the **projective world** around the product. We can produce a **mapping** of the projections around the product

To better know the representations towards the product, some exercises are sometimes purposed, sometimes coming from techniques of creativity

For example, a very frequent exercise is called: PROS-CONS:

PILLORY/ PNNACLE – PROS and CONS

☺- We ask the participants to tell us all elements that comes them to mind, which bring the product to pinnacle .

☹ - We then ask the group to disparage the product by stating all the possible criticisms and all reproaches.

Consumers are asked to exaggerate and to go as far as they can in apology or criticism. This allows to understand the main advantages of the product and also to identify the barriers of consumption

Cognitive universe

We can here deepen the effective attitudes towards the studied product: When, why, where, with whom ...will it be bought and consumed:

- What do consumers really know of the product: different types, origins, segmentations, quality labelling , manufacturers
- Habits of consuming : frequency of purchase, quantities, distribution channels, occasion of consuming : everybody can describe his own habits and behaviour
- Factors of quality of a product

Tasting

We are not exactly in the case of a sensory analysis, with an expert jury.

We prepare some recipes and a planning of tasting:

- - Tasting of a few recipes or varieties of product
- - Comparison with competitive products

Depending of the case, we can have specific places, with individual boxes, so that the consumer is alone and don't see his neighbours. If it is not possible, we ask the participant to taste the product without any loud voice comment.

We have very simple evaluation protocols, with an evaluation scale for

- Aspect
- Smell
- Texture
- Taste
- General feeling

These tests allow having a general coverage of all possible perceptions and feelings toward the product.

The aim is only to orientate the main lines of research and development.

Propositions and suggestions

We can have, generally at the end of the meeting, a more creative discussion around specific questions:

- choice of a brand
- choice of the information on labelling : what do consumers want to know about the product
- choice of a packaging

Or we may enlarge with questions like:

- What are the expectations towards the product, (composition, packaging, positioning...)?
- Or "how to promote the product": "Try to sell the product and convince people to buy it".

3.3.2. Example 2: Focus Groups on "Food Miles" (Ecozept)

In autumn 2006, in a co-operation of ECOZEPT and ENSA.M (National Agriculture and Food University of Montpellier), a Focus Group project on the topic of "Food Miles" has been carried out (Results publishes in: Sirieix et al. 2008).

At this moment, "Food Miles" (a concept that informs customers about the distance that a food product is transported from its origin to the place of final consumption) had entered the public and media-reflected discussion in France. This discussion is particularly interesting with regard to food items.

We addressed the following research questions:

- Is the distance (between the place of production and the place of consumption of a food item) taken into account by consumers when they choose food products? Are consumers aware of complexities of food supply chains?
- Is the distance generally perceived as a negative feature in judging an overall food consumption process?
- Does the perception of distance vary among products (e.g., fresh vs. dry, exotic or not) or according to the buying and/or consumption situation (e.g., supermarkets, grocery stores, hard discount, restaurant)?

We conducted two focus groups. The participants from the metropolitan area of Montpellier (South of France) were recruited thanks to a regional newspaper announcement. Participants (11 women and 5 men) were students (4), workers (9) or retired persons (3), 5 were aged from 20 to 30 years old, 6 from 30 to 45 and 5 from 45 to 60 years old; they received a financial incentive (15 €) to be part of the study. The discussions lasted about two hours each and took place in a simple class room around a large table. We used audio recording for documentation and had two observers in two corners of the room.

As particular tool we used product samples. Two products were chosen for the very long distance they have to travel before reaching French supermarkets: Fiji water (a bottled water, "located at the very edge of a primitive rainforest, 1,500 miles away from the nearest continent", commercialised in Europe), and salt from Himalaya.

They were chosen because there is neither seasonal bias nor other availability issues. Indeed, water and salt are, at any time, available everywhere in France, in any form and quantity. Furthermore, water and salt by their very nature and in comparison to other food products, present several methodological advantages: absence of intolerance or allergies, daily consumption, no 'freshness' and conservation concern, reduced variability of production methods and of use and preparation. Both products were introduced into the focus groups without any preceding information or presentation.

The purpose was to analyse people's reactions to these products and more generally to the distance travelled by products.

The general organization of each focus group contained the following steps:

- Welcome and Round table with short personal presentation of each participant
- Introduction of the first product, filling in of individual questionnaire, guided discussion about the first product, discussion about the questions evoked in the questionnaire and free discussion.
- Introduction of the second product, filling in of individual questionnaire, guided discussion about the second product, Discussion about the questions evoked in the questionnaire and free discussion.
- Recapitulative discussion on both products.

The tool of short individual questionnaires was used here to limit the bias of “altered behaviour in order to enhance personal acceptability”. This behaviour, where participants control themselves too much in order to be “better accepted by the group”, is particularly strong with topics that are ethically and morally relevant.

The participants were not informed about the research objectives and the topic of ‘food miles’ was only introduced at the end of the discussions.

The discussion was moderated and partly based on the first spontaneous reaction, collected by the short questionnaire. During the discussion, we visualised some key topics on a white board.

Furthermore, we used a simple experiment: we placed, at the extremities and on the very floor of the room, pairs of cartons that contained opposite affirmations (e. g. “this product is very strange” – “this product is very familiar”). We asked participants to stand up and to position themselves in the room according to their feeling about the affirmations. Then we asked them to explain their choice and raised a discussion about it.

The analysis was done by content analysis based on paper protocols of the observers and, where necessary, completed by the audio document.

3.4. The steps of organisation of a focus group

Focus Groups need detailed and thorough planning. As they are based on the interaction of human beings, every detail that might potentially influence the reactions and interactions has to be taken into account.

3.4.1. The recruitment of consumers

It is possible to seek persons by ourselves: we can for example publish an announcement on newspapers. Nevertheless, it is often very long and difficult.

In Europe, specialised companies can realise this job. They have large consumers files, which allowed to choose the consumers according to the needs. Generally, the consumers are volunteers and more and more persons seek to be registered on such files.

If it is not possible to go through such companies, we will pay attention not to have too particular population (like students).

The consumers receive a compensation for their participation: about 30- 50 € by person for a 3 hours exercise..

Generally, the group is composed of about ten persons (8 for example). A focus group with more than ten participants is difficult to control. The participants have fewer opportunities to express his/ her opinion.

Very often a person is missing; it is used to ask for ten persons, to have then a group of 8 or 9.

These participants “are recruited” in general a month in advance. One week before the D-day, they have to be called so that to have a confirmation of their presence.

The consumers are informed of the general objective of the meeting but without entering too much in detail. It is important that they understand that the study is important, to be involved in the focus group.

Generally, the group is organised in the evening (at 6 or 7 h pm), when people have finished to work. The duration of the discussion is generally 2 hours, and sometimes more. Three hours are however a maximum, so that persons can go back home not to late.

3.4.2. Location

It is important to lend an adapted place. In Europe, some organisation can lend too a place adapted to qualitative research (and some times to quantitative research, when consumers have to taste products in a large scale).

The place include a pleasant room for the discussion, and if needed, a kitchen which makes it possible to prepare the recipes.

It is interesting to seek a place with individual boxes for tasting and sensory analysis.

In very rare cases, a place where people can be seen (through special mirrors) could be used. In this case, you have to tell it to the group when starting...)

Very often, it is possible to organize focus groups in specialised schools or universities.

3.4.3. Preparation

It is important to give time enough to the preparation of the group meeting. This seems perhaps trivial, but the meeting can be disturbed if the paper-board or pens are forgotten.

It is often necessary to foresee a collation for the participants: they can't be attentive when they are too tired and hungry.

Everything should be set up and ready when the first participants arrive.

We have to buy and bring with us:

- Office equipment: paper board, pencils, labels
- Foodstuff necessary to the preparation of the recipes or collations envisaged, and of course, samples of product to test

- The cheques and receipts for consumer's compensation

If it is not already available in the place, all that is necessary to film or record the group discussion must be taken.

3.4.4. The beginning of the group meeting

The participants will receive refreshment when they arrive (water and fruit juice, some biscuits). It is important that the participants feel very quickly in confidence.

After having taken place in the room, the moderator presents himself and describes briefly the study and the objectives of the focus group. He must reassure about anonymity, the value of all opinions. He promises to give all explanations and answer to any question at the end of the meeting.

He informs the participants that the meeting will be filmed or recorded.

He just goes round the table

- the consumers indicate their first name,
- and some general data (size of their family, occupation)
- and some precision on their habits related to the product

The organizer gives then general instructions:

- Everyone takes part, and gives his point of view
- The others are not censured.
- Every one expresses personally.
- Only one person speaking at a time
- The mobile telephones are switched off.

3.4.5. The animation of the group meeting

The moderator will animate the meeting and will take notes on paperboard, which could be read by all the participants

It is often essential that there is one observer, who will take notes during the meeting, to complement the organizer

In some cases, another observer can be in charge of what occurs in the group and especially interpersonal interactions, non-verbal responses (like smiles or body postures). This might have interest for the focus group analysis.

The moderator listens attentively and has respect for participants

The moderator has to be attentive so that each participant can speak: some are shy, and others on the contrary are always speaking and have too much influence on the discussion.

He has to be able to react to what is said, to make synthesis, and to analyze quickly the main points and conclusions.

The moderator follows the guideline and should be completely familiar with it. He has to respect the timing for each question or exercise.

The personality of the animator is of great importance related to the quality of the results. Two different moderators can have different quality of discussion, more or less rich and interesting.

3.5. Treatment

Each meeting must be analysed in a detailed report.

We have to be able to do a synthesis of the "matter" given by the participants, to elicit general conclusions

Each question of the guideline will be treated independently and will be the subject of a drafting; We gather the answers, topics, ideas which were evoked and we make a point to draw each time, the most important conclusion.

In each case, we can bring our most important comments related to the reactions of the group towards the question. For example, we can mention that the question was found too difficult for the group or that the answers were really very poor (or the contrary!)

Depending of the cases, some treatments might have to be done, sometimes during the group discussion and explained and commented by the participants(for example average of notes for tasting). Or average of notes for a codified question (often rare in this type of methodology)

We write a general conclusion for the group.

If several groups are carried out under different conditions, we will compare the various groups, while endeavouring to interpret the differences: for example, differences by country, or zone of life (rural, urban) or any other criteria.

The meeting report of a 3 hours focus group discussion is rather long to write and takes often at least two days. It is necessary to summarize the paperboards notes and all other notes. It is very important also to listen to the records or videos.

It must be at the same time complete and synthetic: we don't seek to know the detailed opinion of such or such consumer

3.6. Limits

The quality of the discussion is variable and can't always be foreseen.

It depends on:

- The quality of the guideline: remind that there is not a single good way to realize a guideline.
- The aptitude of the moderator to manage the group.

- The quality of the group itself : the participants can be more and less passive,
- and of course the interest of the subject itself for a consumer.

The limits of this consumer science tool are the limits of all qualitative methodologies researches. The aim is to allow the emergence of all attitude- opinions and behaviour of a population without any weighting,

Thus, a Focus group discussion does not allow segmenting the attitudes- opinions-behaviour of consumers according to the classic criteria such as age, occupation, income etc.

It is possible to have large part of targeted population not represented;

The main advantage is to better understand a situation/ market/ concept/ and to have a strong representation of consumers reactions and positions.

The focus group discussions are very important to set up a quantitative survey and will allow realising a good questionnaire. The quantitative survey will give answers which can be quantified and segmented according the classic criteria of population.

4. Resume

The qualitative research method "Focus Groups" has important limits with regard to representativeness and reproducibility of results. These limits, characteristic for most qualitative research approaches, have to be considered in usage and interpretation.

It is generally admitted, that (given a careful and thorough implementation) Focus Group are among the best tools for the first approach and the wide exploration of a research field. It is ideally combined with other research steps: Focus Groups for an explorative phase; followed by a second phase of quantitative research that will bring about representativeness and reproducibility.

In our project "Focus Balkans", Focus groups are foreseen in the four case studies of the project. All of our case studies are related to the overall topics of "health" and "well-being" of the consumers.

The present paper confirms fully the appropriateness of Focus Groups in the projects' context: Focus groups will be a key tool to better understand the consumer behaviour, expectations and barriers with regard to each specific sector of the case studies:

- niche market : organic food, regional food, dietetic food
- and a major commodity market related to human health (fruit)

Focus groups appear as key tools to explore, via our different case studies, the link between nutrition and health.

The different focus groups on the different thematic will allow to:

- better understand the dimensions of behaviour and perception of Balkan Countries consumers concerning the health dimension of food products;
- compare the conclusions related to the actual and to come position of consumers towards food products related to health and well being.

We can further assume that the Focus Groups bring about important bases for the framework and the implementation of the quantitative surveys that are to be done within "Focus Balkans".

At this early stage of the research we can, as well, presume that our Focus Groups can generate new information on the method itself: a cross-comparison of results between nations and sectors, and later, a comparison with the results of the quantitative research, will enrich methodological knowledge of the research tool "Focus Groups".

5. Literature

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