

Everywhere and Nowhere: Focus Groups as All-Purpose Devices

Can a focus group be all of us? Rebecca Lemov explores how the box of donuts and the one-way mirror have become essential features of our self-understanding.

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When I die, I want to come back with real power.
I want to come back as a member of a focus group.
—Roger Ailes, legendary strategist for Ronald Reagan

By the end of the twentieth century, the focus group came very close to being a universal tool in America. Even in face of a generation of new attention-spangled, Twitter-spawned techniques, the focus group continues soldiering on as one of the most ubiquitous devices that affects and reflects on modern life in the early twenty-first century. Indeed, when implemented on such platforms as Facebook and internet meetup sites, the focus group is continually subject to rebirth and reformation. It is uniquely malleable. (Reports of its death, according to at least one blogger, have been exaggerated). This under-the-radar quality allows it to adapt to new conditions in the so-called digital age. At least, this is what I mean to prove, but I will not be surprised, for reasons detailed below, if the reader does not immediately share this point of view, for focus groups, to many people, are a bit like mosquitoes: they certainly exist, and there is admittedly little we can do about that, but let us try not to pay them any more attention than they deserve, besides a distracted swatting.

Focus groups, however, are more complicated. Even their “nowhereness,” their seeming inconsequentiality, is a key component of their power. One of the most interesting qualities of focus groups is that they seem so dull, conjuring up images of badly furnished rooms and fluorescent lighting. They seem, in short, hardly worth focusing on. Yet they are almost everywhere. (They are focusing on *you*). How did this odd now-I see-you-now-I-don’t quality come about?

Born in World War II as a device to gauge American GIs’ attitudes toward the fascist enemy and the possibility of inculcating a greater willingness to fight, the focus group, then known as the “focused interview,” was the contribution of sociologist Robert K. Merton. Earlier studies such as John Dollard’s Army-sponsored and Rockefeller-funded “Fear and Courage in Battle” revealed that a surprising portion of United States troops could not articulate their reasons for going to war and this resulted in a less vigorous will to fight – in short, a less motivated soldier. How to remedy the troops’ anagnosia – their ignorance of geopolitics and fascism in particular? Campaigns went forward on many levels including propaganda, education, conditioning, and – of concern in this current brief history – investigating the susceptibility of trainees’ inner attitudes to persuasive message. First, an expert motivator had to see clearly “into the heads” of those he wished to address. As Merton recalled of his first encounters, in the 1930s, with the prelude to the focus group (interviews he conducted with Boston-area hoboes and homeless men under “sometimes strenuous” conditions), “[T]his situation strikes me as providing almost privileged access to people’s states of mind and affect” (Merton 1987: 553). He continued to develop this interviewing method and, as the war went on, Merton used it to home in on soldiers’ minute-by-minute responses to situations and information—to provide an ever-improving quality of data.

Along the way, Merton elaborated many new and targeted techniques. The focused-interview technique of “graphic reinstatement” produced the following exchange in wartime research:

Interviewer: A little while ago, you were talking about the scenes of bombed-out school houses, and you seemed to have more ideas on that. [Show still from film.] How did you feel when you saw that?

Recruit: I noticed a little girl lying under a culvert—it made me ready to go fight then. Because I have a daughter of my own, and I knew how I would feel if anything like that happened to her (Merton 1956: 60).

The technique allowed a researcher to pinpoint the instant at which and the exact visual cue through which a soldier’s motivation to fight shifted. It was almost like finding an “on” button. But the point of the focused interview was not just to locate “on” but also, above all, to disentangle strands of motivation and nodes of concomitant behavior change. In other words, it was to be highly precise about the technique’s operations.

By the mid-1950s the research device, now named the focus group, found its way to the commercial sphere. (It was largely ignored in the nascent and munificently-funded Cold War behavioral sciences as “too qualitative.”) Research from Harvard small-group sociologist Robert “Freed” Bales brought into circulation – in the form of his self-designated “Special Room” experiments — the now-familiar architecture of one-way mirror and bank of experts.

A standard method was emerging, and according to my research, the combination of Merton’s techniques with Bales’ set up rendered a flexible design that could be constructed in almost any set of tandem rooms. The focus group’s popularity spread. It was focus groups, or so legend as well as the notorious figure of motivational guru Ernst Dichter had it, that told marketers why instant cake mixes weren’t selling to *Feminine-Mystique*-era homemakers. Such mixes, with freeze-dried egg product already included, required the baker to add only one thing: water. Yet American women, when they spoke up in focus groups, revealed they wanted both the advantage of a convenient mix and the feeling of having added something substantial. Marketers recommended, with a Freudian twist, that Betty Crocker alter its mix to require the addition of a fresh egg: “The industry recognized this feeling of guilt and said, ‘All right, if you feel that bad about it, add your own eggs.’ Now the housewife felt very happy because she could use the cake mix and still express her individuality,” reported Dichter in his characteristically vague but decisive style (Dichter and Berger 2002: 157). In this way a bromide was born. Industry reasoning, supported by focus-group evidence, was that the housewife “needed permission” to indulge herself, which permission came in the form of the egg-based benediction—proof she was adding something of herself, not her ovaries but her “individuality.” Accordingly, despite the tenuous Freud-slash-quasi-liberationist logic, sales of such cake mixes rose. By the time Sara Lee purveyed a line

of instant confections in the 1970s, consensus had fallen on the winning formula of 70/30: 70 percent contribution from the cake-mix assemblage and 30 percent from the baker. The fact that this success story has achieved the status of apocrypha, although it seems genuinely to have occurred, is of interest.¹

From testing kitchen products the device spread to the movie industry in the 1970s, and to PR and K Street in the 1980s and 1990s. Recently the focus group vaulted into the domain of “meta” or perhaps came to grips with its farcical tendencies when Stephen Colbert adopted focus-group guru Frank Luntz’s techniques to brand his forthcoming Super-Pac. A clip finds Colbert eating popcorn behind a one-way mirror while a roomful of potential voters debates the merits of his proposed slogan, “Corporations are People.” This would seem to mark a fairly recent development in the focus group, in which they become the object of humor. In addition to inspiring attacks and high-level critiques, the focus group is now well known enough to be spoofed in an ad for fast food in which a participant talks back to the observers behind the one-way mirror. Focus groups’ entertainment value is apparently self-evident: not only do clients watch actual groups in real time, but a 2010 “Turnaround” campaign for Domino’s even included video footage that captures a focus group gone dramatically awry, with participants declaring, “Domino’s pizza crust tastes to me like cardboard” and “Worst excuse for pizza I’ve ever had” – a story line shortly followed by on-camera Kamikaze visits to the erstwhile focus-groupers’ homes to force them to taste the re-engineered pizzas.

All in all, via the focus group participants are the objects of an intense *focus*. Each person, actually or metaphorically, is the target of a research team’s experimental eye. The focus group, thus, is part of a process of exploring and colonizing more and more private realms, a process that now extends to the social bonds between individuals, themselves subject to scrutiny and what might be considered a relatively new form of control – one that approaches “ultrapid forms of free-floating control” (Deleuze 1992: 3). As technical means of “getting in tune with the reality of the interviewee” (Kreuger and Casey 2009: 3), focus groups share the central goal of the social sciences – to see the world as if from another person’s point of view – while at the same time they constantly calibrate a new way to encounter that world. They change what they know. They intervene in reality.

Everyone knows what “focus group” means, or at least thinks they do — it is at root a specially designed room fully rigged with microphones and a conference table, possibly equipped with a box of donuts, and featuring one-way mirrors instead of windows. Behind the mirrors sit the expert researchers, tracking participants’ behavior, taking copious notes, and deriving conclusions. A gathering of clients or business owners or campaign operatives sits in an adjunct space watching as, inside the room on the other side of the mirror, a group of people assemble around a table tasting

¹ Still, whether it occurred at Betty Crocker or at Bisquick is not clear. See, e.g., the account in *Newsweek*: “Inside the Consumer: The New Debate: Does He Know his Own Mind?” *Newsweek* 10 October 1955, p. 92, which centers on biscuits.

salad dressing, speaking about a candidate, trying out a cell phone, responding to a public policy, or watching a film. As a result, a somewhat randomly gathered quorum of people, preferably though not necessarily strangers and distinguished in part by their willingness to attend a focus group—their views duly recorded, transcribed, and interpreted—can thus have an inordinate effect on the national direction. Political steering by means of focus groups inspires derision from some quarters, as when Joan Didion, speaking of how focus groups could be used in 2004 to prove one thing or, equally, its opposite, commented: “The reduction of the American electorate to twenty people who lived in or near Cincinnati was in fact the elegance of the mechanism, the demonstration that the system was legible, the perfected codex of the entire political process” (Didion 2004). It is not only an act of reduction that focus groups accomplish – from two million potential voters to twenty Midwesterners as their synecdochal voicebox. As Didion pinpoints, the focus group’s work is also to *stand for*: it embodies the “perfected codex” of the political system itself. It actively symbolizes that which it represents. It marks and sustains a kind of confidence and streamlines the dimension of trust in which, in fact, it traffics. For with its circular mechanism, the technique renders reliable that which it produces, even when it is wrong.

Democratic devices, they inspire more and more talk from the subjects on whom their focus trains. *Thank you for listening to me*, researchers report hearing when a group has finished its session. “There is something about a focus group that is different and causes people to *feel* that someone is listening,” comment two veterans (Kreuger and Casey 2009: xiii).

The process of running focus groups and making decisions from their operations helps reinforce their own conditions of knowledge, reminding me of what Pierre Bourdieu said about habitus, or the conditioning conditions that make up social life itself: they function like a train laying its own tracks. In a paradoxical manner, the focus group runs along tracks its own movement lays out, as it were, post-hoc but somehow preemptively. Another way of saying this is that a focus group is a little engine for targeted change. A focus group can make a presumptive case, preemptively-arrived-at, into an unavoidably-so reality. They not only change policies and press relations, they change the people who participate in them. People come out different from how they went in. The focus group itself has become an agent of causation, a scripter of response. It shows eighteen-year-old sweat-shirted boys and married mothers-of-one *how to talk* about products, *how to relate* to things or phenomena, and are thus social engineering steering devices, in effect. As researchers Bristol and Fern have shown, participants in a focus group will experience a unique mix of “anonymity and arousal” – which, better than any other method, facilitates “expression of shared experiences.” (Bristol and Fern 1996). Focus groups address the realm of the scarcely thought out, the inchoate, the shared but not spoken social reality between and among people—and then they *alter* these hard-to-talk-about things. Focus groups thus give a feeling of inevitability to the previously contingent. They are not just about representing a truth about reality. They change reality.

To return to where we began, there is a curious paradox inherent in focus groups. On the one hand, they are not a secret: While conducting this research, I was often told, “Oh, focus groups – my sister runs them” – or a cousin hires them, or a student friend does mock juries for them, an aunt makes her living participating in them. Yet for all their ubiquity they are strangely unknown. Their demise and obsolescence in an “internet age” is frequently announced, yet their popularity with corporations and campaigns remains unabated, with or without online techniques tacked on. They are at work pretty much everywhere, but few know *how* they work (even those who administer them) and even fewer know the unlikely history of where they come from. They constitute a vast social experiment the results of which are unknown.

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