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Keeping Focus Isn't Easy: A Review of Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide

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Abstract

The purpose of this review is to examine the salient aspects of the book *Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide* by Robert J. Morais (2010). This review will consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups as well as explain whether or not the author effectively achieved his goal of providing a tool that can be used by veterans and novices of qualitative research. Additionally, this review will further describe, analyze, and explore the book as well as what other researchers have shared about focus groups by comparing my experience with reading the book and how I was affected by what I read with how I might employ some of the skills highlighted by the author.

Keywords

Focus Group, Qualitative Research, Social Science, Consumer

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Keeping Focus Isn't Easy: A Review of *Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide*

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*The purpose of this review is to examine the salient aspects of the book *Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide* by Robert J. Morais (2010). This review will consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of focus groups as well as explain whether or not the author effectively achieved his goal of providing a tool that can be used by veterans and novices of qualitative research. Additionally, this review will further describe, analyze, and explore the book as well as what other researchers have shared about focus groups by comparing my experience with reading the book and how I was affected by what I read with how I might employ some of the skills highlighted by the author. Key Words: Focus Group, Qualitative Research, Social Science, Consumer.*

In this review, I look at the strengths, weaknesses, and functionalities of *Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide* (Morais, 2010) by examining how the author traverses back and forth between the nuances of effectively planning, moderating, and analyzing focus groups and how the author sought to provide an easy to use manual for someone interested in using focus groups as a research tool. As a doctoral student I chose this book because I thought it would help me to better understand the purpose of focus groups and their value in the world of qualitative research. Besides presenting the basics of focus group methodology, I also learned there were a number of things that must go right in the planning phase for focus groups to be successful (Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998) so I will discuss some of those issues and will ultimately focus on the areas of the book I believe are most significant. Below is my effort to explain my interpretation of the book and how I might actively engage in using qualitative research in general and focus groups in particular in future research endeavors.

First of all, the flow of the book was commendable. The book began by Morais (2010) describing the primary participants and the roles each play in a focus group. The author seamlessly connected these roles with the core function and purpose of focus groups and solidified their importance by explaining the kind of information gathered by focus groups is markedly different from other types of qualitative research. In fact, not only are focus group outcomes different, but the uses of those outcomes are often limited only by the creativity of the researcher and the perceived power of the participants (Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007). A helpful insight I found in the text was the need to select the appropriate moderator as well as asking the right questions. Within this construct rests the importance of the environment of the "back-room," which often hinders focus group processing (Morais, 2010). Along with these insights, I found perhaps the most critical portion of the book pertained to interpreting focus group results and the inquisitiveness of the moderator.

The emphasis Morais (2010) placed on the need for practitioners to effectively use focus group methodology was particularly necessary because it supplied an

appropriate level of rationale for the importance of the proper use of this type of qualitative research. For this reason I think this book is a worthy read, especially for beginners. According to Morais the principal outcome of focus groups is to gain insight from consumers or respondents about what they consider most important or what they like or dislike. Knowing this is particularly useful to me as a student because it provides me with the ability to use that understanding as a foundation for successfully utilizing focus groups in the future.

I also took notice that of late the use of focus groups online has increased, but according to Morais (2010), they should not replace in-person forums because of the lack of nonverbal feedback and the difficulty in determining whether the respondent is in fact who they say they are. This lack of verifiability makes online focus group forums a secondary research tool at best. Moreover, the effective aspect of creatively moderating the focus group methodology can include such initiatives as using symbolism and even drawings to initiate respondent conversation. However, according to Musallam, Coleman, and Nowak (2010) simple agreement or disagreement is not as much the desired result of focus groups as much as why the respondents agree or disagree or why they feel or believe what they believe. This involves the moderator probing with care, avoiding leading questions, and willingly uncovering perceptions and beliefs without overreaching appropriate boundaries.

Morais (2010) also considered the optimal number of focus group participants and cautioned against paucity or abundance. In some cases the subject matter may dictate the size, but in most cases smaller groups allow for more interaction and are preferred. Likewise, choosing an appropriate and diverse demographic mix also helps to forge the conversations of focus groups (Agnew, Mertzman, Longwell-Grice, & Saffold, 2008). One of the most useful features of the Morais book was the specific tasks required to moderate and implement a successful group. The author went to great pains to explain how marketing research seeks to dissuade disenfranchisement by asking for public input (Morais, 2010). Furthermore, Morais recommended integrating planning and implementation throughout the entire focus group process, especially when the group focus changes directions from what was intended; the end result of this sometimes culminates in delays, additional costs, and other potential unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, Morais (2010) emphasized the need for researchers or consultants to ask the right question which seemed foreboding and intimidating to me as a beginning qualitative researcher.

Morais (2010) went on to stress the results of one focus group are not necessarily generalizable or representative of the larger population and efforts to do so are highly discouraged. Instead, focus groups simply provide viewpoints that act as snapshots in time. However, these snapshots should not be used to infer or predict a general outcome because using focus groups in such a way is outside the scope of focus group utility. Devising and executing a plan based on research from one single focus group has the potential to mislead those for whom the research is accomplished. Alternately, discarding focus group responses because they are not in agreement with the desired outcome also dilutes and negates the true function of a focus group. With either dynamic come detrimental issues because outcomes are often considered particularly specious (Castellblanch & Abrahamson, 2003). Additionally, though respondents report one preference, their actions may not bear this as truth. After all, we are well aware of the

trustworthiness and reliability limitations of self reports in data analysis and collection. Finally, it seemed particularly appropriate for the author to include a discussion of the role the researcher's personality may play as a determinant or influencer when moderating, planning, and implementing focus group research initiatives.

Regarding the mechanics and functionality of the book as they relate to its strengths and weaknesses, I found the style and flow of the book made for easy reading and probable application. In addition, the length of the chapters made for ease in the creation of a checklist and served to enhance the functionality of that application even more. However, since the book focused primarily on the act of performing market research, it did not seem attune to my immediate needs as a human services student. In contrast to its marketing perspective, the book skillfully examined the thought processes and decision making efforts required for focus group methodology in general and it was helpful to see the strengths of focus groups in comparison to other methods of qualitative research as well as how these clearly and logically designed groups can enhance other techniques. Morais (2010) emphasized the fact there is great need for the researcher to examine the intended data that are desired and understand issues and principles that might get in the way of focus group processing. Even so, the book's focus on product placement marketing perspectives were initially offsetting to me. However, as I continued to read the book I found myself becoming more focused on ways I might use focus groups in future research initiatives. Finally, other strengths of this book were the anecdotal examples and explanations outlining the best way to construct the moderator's guide, which would be equally useful for social science as well as marketing research (Morais, 2010).

Similarly, the Morais (2010) book affected me in four distinct and valuable ways. First, it taught me that in order to be effective at administering focus groups I need to be prepared to use my active listening and observing skills from the outset. Some of the best things a moderator can do are to use opening comments as an icebreaker, remain cognizant and vigilant about time, and keep the group flowing in accordance with the guide. Second, understanding the dynamics of the "back-room" cannot be overstated. The commentary and other activities of the "back-room" can detract from the desired goals of the group and is often counterintuitive. Third, because of the first two learning points, it is imperative all participants understand and agree to abide by specific ground rules. And finally, the last nugget of wisdom I learned concerning focus groups is their outcomes are helpful in understanding whether an intended marketing strategy will attract a specific demographic or not and they answer questions other methodologies may not. This alone shows there is indeed an appropriate place for focus groups in the realm of qualitative research.

Summarily, I found *Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide* (Morais, 2010) easy to understand. At first glance it was not clear to me how focus group methodology is more or less appropriate than any another, but the book did an adequate job of clarifying these points as I read the entire text. Therefore, it should be expected if I focus on the premise of the book I should conceivably create a stronger, better, more "focused" focus group. The explanations Morais (2010) used to tout the use of focus groups in action research were particularly intriguing because of the flexibility endemic in the methodology. Further, the information on the importance of planning for and using the strengths of the group and previous research was quite useful. Also, the examples on

deconstructing and reconstructing initiatives were particularly interesting because understanding how to break down a problem is one of the first steps in research. And what the book seemed to miss in length the author made up for with the pragmatic substance of the text. This attention to detail and easy to understand flow of the author's message were effectively employed. With this in mind it was clear the book has the potential to be particularly useful for novices, but is likely too simplistic for veterans of qualitative research in general and focus groups in particular.

The book had strengths and weaknesses, but the strengths tended to outweigh those weaknesses because the book embodied valid approaches and reasons for focus group planning and implementation. Overall, Morais (2010) provided an astute interpretation and examination of the functions of focus groups and shared some valuable first-hand experiences that would be useful in virtually any arena in which this qualitative research methodology were employed. The richness in the quality of those experiences served to help me understand even more that undertaking focus groups can prove valuable because of the depth of subjective information gleaned from them. The author did a superior job of keeping the reader motivated to continue to read what truly could easily have been an extremely dull and mundane subject. The case studies seemed to be inspired because the author adequately highlighted how focus groups can be used to generate ideas and explore previously unrecognized options. Like thermometers, focus groups are simply part of a larger decision making process, but should not be the final authority on any given decision because they only allow researchers to test the temperature by exploring how points of view are formed and explain how stories, beliefs, and attitudes are informed by cultural settings, such as in ethnographies (Edmunds, 1999).

Through this book Morais (2010) showed focus groups allow researchers to deepen their knowledge and understanding and in marketing they help businesses refine and define future projects. The author adeptly examined the broad spectrum of issues associated with implementing and moderating focus groups. Though much of the information contained within the book specifically concentrated on facets associated with the marketing industry, the same principles can equally be useful in planning for and executing focus groups in social science research. The mere subjectivity of the data serves to further that supposition. As was aptly highlighted in the book, keeping focus groups headed in the right direction can be difficult, but is not an impossible undertaking or goal to accomplish, provided the appropriate level of preparation and planning takes place.

In conclusion, this review examined some of the most prominent strengths and weaknesses of the book, then transitioned to specific highlights of the book in light of the knowledge other researchers shared about focus groups, and went on to describe the use of this qualitative research methodology in marketing and social science investigative initiatives. Finally, the review concluded with my explanation and interpretation of what I believed the author intended to accomplish as well as a critique on whether or not he successfully completed his stated goals. In short, this book was more attune to the needs of a novice rather than a seasoned qualitative researcher in the social sciences. For novices however, the book was an appropriate read with useful pragmatic principles and points and may very well prove to be an effective reference before beginning the revelatory world of focus groups. Finally, portions of the book can be accessed in e-

reader format on the Amazon website (<http://www.amazon.com>) and there is supplemental information available at www.wsm-inc.com. Furthermore, hard copies of the book can be purchased directly from Paramount Market Publishing's website (<http://www.paramountbooks.com>).

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