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Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher: A Book Review from a Beginning Researcher's Perspective

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Abstract

Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher: Methods for Social Inquiry, by Jennifer Cyr (2019), is an essential research tool for the first-time researcher who is utilizing focus groups. The book breaks the information down into digestible bites and spirals the material reiterating the major points to ensure understanding. For a beginning researcher, this is a thorough resource for guidance in establishing effective research questions to yield usable data that may be coded and themed in a usable format. Readers will find a descriptive walk through the focus group process, from start to finish giving the reasoning for the focus group process. This is an easy yet informative read for those beginning the qualitative research process utilizing focus groups.

Keywords

focus groups, qualitative research, analysis, coding, interview

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***Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher:* A Book Review from a Beginning Researcher's Perspective**

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Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher: Methods for Social Inquiry, by Jennifer Cyr (2019), is an essential research tool for the first-time researcher who is utilizing focus groups. The book breaks the information down into digestible bites and spirals the material reiterating the major points to ensure understanding. For a beginning researcher, this is a thorough resource for guidance in establishing effective research questions to yield usable data that may be coded and themed in a usable format. Readers will find a descriptive walk through the focus group process, from start to finish giving the reasoning for the focus group process. This is an easy yet informative read for those beginning the qualitative research process utilizing focus groups.

Keywords: focus groups, qualitative research, analysis, coding, interview

Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher: Methods for Social Inquiry, by Jennifer Cyr (2019), provides an introduction to utilizing focus groups in qualitative research. The introduction provides a definition of focus groups as defined by Morgan (1996), “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 130). The author, Cyr, emphasizes that the purpose of focus groups is to understand the “substance” (p. 2) of what people say, what they think, and why they think it. Cyr provides a brief history of focus groups. She reiterates the importance of focus groups by highlighting three different types of analysis: the individual, the group, and the interaction between the two (Cyr, 2019). The author expands on this concept in detail, stressing the purpose and importance of all three sources of data and the difference in the data that can be obtained from each.

The author outlines when and how to use focus groups with a strong emphasis on the research question at the center. The research question, according to Cyr (2019), informs the purpose of the study, the participants included, and the data intended to be collected. Focus groups are used when there is little data existing regarding the research question. The open-ended format of the focus group questions provides a wide net for data to be explored. The versatility of the focus group is portrayed as an asset, again referring to the individual perspective, the collective perspective from the group, and the interaction between them both.

There are challenges associated with using a focus group to collect data, which the book mentions as well. Cyr (2019) highlights the “human factor” as a challenge to the focus group process. The training of the moderator and careful attention to the protocol that is used are ways to mitigate the human factor. The author walks through several human issues that may occur and how to work through them. For example, groupthink was highlighted first. Groupthink is when the whole group agrees on an issue even if individually the participants would not agree. Other human factors to be aware of are mentioned, such as hostility and passivity, and Cyr provides tools with which the moderator can mitigate these hiccups and refocus the group. These elements of group interviewing are essential for a new researcher to be aware of and know how to move past obstacles such as these during the focus group sessions.

Cyr (2019) provides several exemplars throughout each chapter as references for those who are new to the focus group method. This practical application is a strength of the book. The reiterative delivery of the content in the book is extremely helpful for clarification and reteaching and is another strength of the text. However, this also could be viewed as a weakness to the proficient researcher who desires more depth and creativity to the focus group method. The text is easy to read, which is a benefit, but may be lacking complexity for the experienced researcher. For the reader who is new to focus group research, this book can be a useful guide before or during the assembly of focus groups, creation of focus group questions, or even when trying to decide if the focus group's method of inquiry fits a certain research design. The content offered is helpful in refining strategies and maximizing the benefits of engaging a focus group.

A sample protocol (Cyr, 2019, p. 116) is provided as a tool for previewing wording that can be used and the format of the questions. Also, there is a helpful sample script included with the protocol for the moderator, which can be adapted to any focus group. A list of data analysis software is provided in the appendix with a brief description of each product, how it can be used, and its strengths and weaknesses. Five products were listed: Atlas.ti (<https://atlasti.com/>), HyperRESEARCH (<http://www.researchware.com/products/hyperresearch.html>), MAXQDA (<https://www.maxqda.com/>), NVivo (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>), and QDA Miner (<https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>).

As a doctoral student at the University of South Florida, a research institution, I am a new researcher. I am currently learning about many different types of inquiry. I chose focus groups as my method for my current research in order to extract the essence of the strategies enacted in the classroom that yield the most just and most effective outcomes for all learners. Leading in a deductive analysis manner, I approached the inquiry with predetermined codes in mind; however, while reading this book, I considered the organic manner of the data more extensively and adjusted the focus group questions accordingly. Cyr's (2019) book affirmed what I had gleaned from Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013) that focus groups are "collective conversations or group interviews," expanded on the definition, and provided tools to refine my focus group features.

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