

Focus Group Research – Out of Focus?

Thomas L. Greenbaum (1998): *The Handbook of Focus Group Research. Second Edition.* Sage, 261 pages

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While reading Thomas L. Greenbaum's revised Handbook for Focus Group Research, I caught myself asking: "Is this way of doing research becoming out of focus?" The problem with Greenbaum's book is not, first of all, that it is written within the 'know-how-to-do-it-paradigm' presenting a 'market research methodology'. The problem is more about the lack of theoretical and critical perspectives on the method.

What is Focus Group Research?

Focus Group Research is a way of collecting qualitative data on the participants' perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas about a certain theme or topic. A focus group is a small, relatively homogenous, group of people, often consisting of 6 to 12 members. A trained moderator sets the stage, with prepared questions and probes, inducing the participants' response. A focus group interview, therefore, differs from other small-group interviews in that it is better organised and more formal. In addition, a small-group interview is often used for consensus-building and problem-solving, while a focus group interview is performed to find out each person's point of view and to encourage people to articulate different positions and conflicts of interests.

In his book, Greenbaum portrays Focus Group Research as a "market research methodology", aiming at effective marketing. For him, Focus Group Research may be used to collect information about consumers' usage patterns, habits and attitudes, to develop and advertise new products, and to evaluate packaging, advertising and promotion of different products. Focus Group Research may also be used to stimulate new ideas among employees, and to assess their motivation and attitude toward the organisation.

Use and Abuse of the Method

Greenbaum's book is one of many recent books and articles on Focus Group Research, describing ways of doing research within business, marketing, health and communication. According to Greenbaum, focus groups have been commonly used in market research since the late 60's. But already in 1946, Merton & Kendall used the term 'focused interview' denoting a group interview to investigate people's responses to a concrete, common experience of mass communication, whether it was a film, a radio programme or a printed text. They underlined the need for a prior content analysis of the film, the radio programme or the text, in order to generate hypothesis about the impacts and responses to these media, and as a basis for the interview guide. In this way, Merton & Kendall introduced the 'focused interview' as a structured group interview, making it possible both to test the validity of the hypothesis de-

rived from the content analysis and to determine unanticipated reactions to the situation, thus giving rise to fresh hypothesis.

The more focus groups are used, however, the more they change. And the more popular, the more the method may be misused. Greenbaum points out that Focus Group Research is a way of generating rich, in-depth qualitative data on consumers usage patterns or attitudes towards different products, services and programs. The findings should not be generalised, as the results only represent the view of the participants, not of a larger group. The method may thus be abused, Greenbaum tells us, if the findings are used to estimate future results or to determine marketing strategies, because this “could ultimately damage the overall marketing program” (p 13).

What’s the Problem of not having a Problem?

Greenbaum’s book is first and foremost a handbook on different topics, such as ‘research decisions’, ‘the role of the moderator’, ‘common mistakes’, ‘controlling the costs’ and ‘focus group trends’. The chapter on ‘moderating techniques’ is informative, as it discloses useful information on projective, probing and controlling techniques. The problem with Greenbaum’s book, however, is that he does not seem to have any problems. He does not question either the purpose of the inquiry, the researchers’ biases, the role of the moderator, the quality of the interactions between the moderator and the participants, the way of analysing data or the possibilities both to misinterpret and abuse the information before, during or after the interview. As such, this book is an insufficient tool when it comes to central questions regarding the validity and reliability of the Focus Group Research.

Research - In or Out of Focus?

Greenbaum is predicting an increasing popularity of Focus Group Research. In 1990, about 110,000 focus groups in USA were performed, and by the next decade, the yearly number should be about the double. The reason is a contemporary qualitative shift within ‘the research industry’, and an approval of qualitative research within different non-profit organisations, including educational and governmental institutions. The increasing popularity of Focus Group Research will, as Greenbaum writes, demand an improved professionalism, including a greater pressure on moderators to develop their skills, and on facilities to offer the very best service. But it will also demand a focus on the potential dangers of misunderstanding and misusing the method and a greater awareness of the different norms guiding any scientific activity: disinterestedness, communalism, universalism, criticism and organised scepticism. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether Greenbaum’s book represents a research tradition, which is about to become out of focus, or in other words, lose the awareness of the ethos of science.

References:

- Greenbaum, Thomas L. (1998): *The Handbook for Focus Group Research. Second Edition.* Sage, Thousand Oaks
- Merton, Robert K. & Kendall, Patricia L. (1946): The Focused Interview. *American Journal of Sociology*, 51 (6), pp 541 - 557