

INFO 272. Qualitative Research Methods

Focus Groups and Expert Interviews

Fall 2014

Types of Interviews

1. **individual depth interviews**
2. **narrative interviews**: focusing on a specific event or experience
3. **TODAY: expert interview**: often centers less on the individual and more on a complex process, an organization, etc
4. **ethnographic interviews**: usually situated in interviewees cultural milieu, often spontaneous and informal
5. **TODAY: joint interviews and focus groups**: i.e. husband and wife, family, household, co-workers, etc.
6. **projective interviews**: incorporate images, tasks, objects into conversation

Focus Groups

- ❖ Very popular in marketing research
- ❖ 8-10 people – typically strangers
- ❖ A trained facilitator
- ❖ Opinions about a new (or existing) product or service
- ❖ Two-way mirror so 'management' can observe



Focus Groups

“an especially nice situation for revealing variations in perspectives and attitude and a ready means, through subtle pitting of one against the other, for distinguishing between shared and variable perspectives.” [schatzman and strauss 1973]

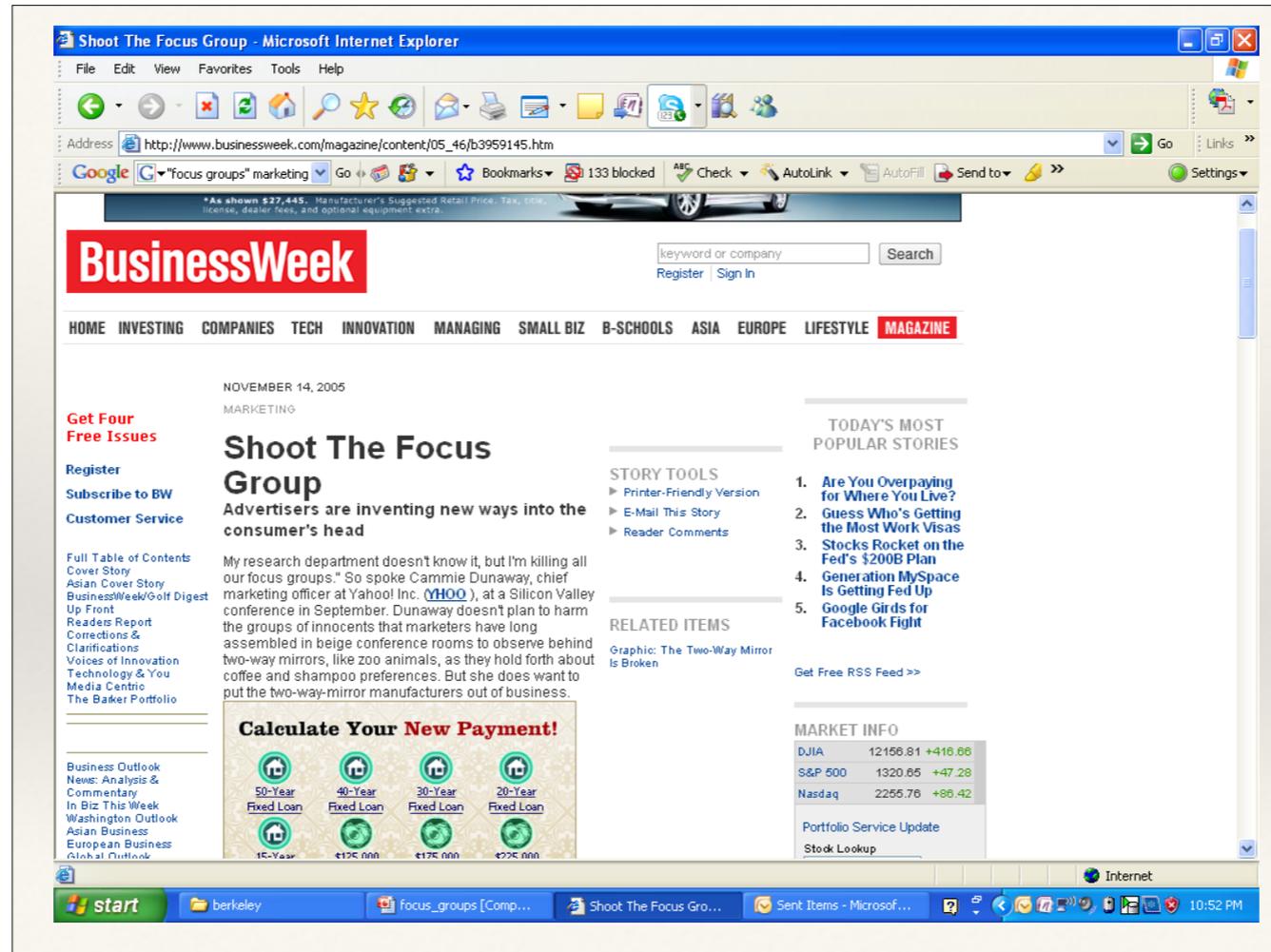
Focus Groups

- ❖ Can be ego-centric (would I buy this?)
- ❖ Can be externally-oriented (how are factory processes organized and carried out?)
- ❖ Can be collaborative (what health care services are most needed within this community?)

Standard Criticism of Focus Groups

- ❖ **1) Conformity** — tendency to conform around particular views. When one member is domineering
- ❖ **2) Artificiality** – voicing views and experiences among strangers in a conference room. Problem of “professional respondents.”



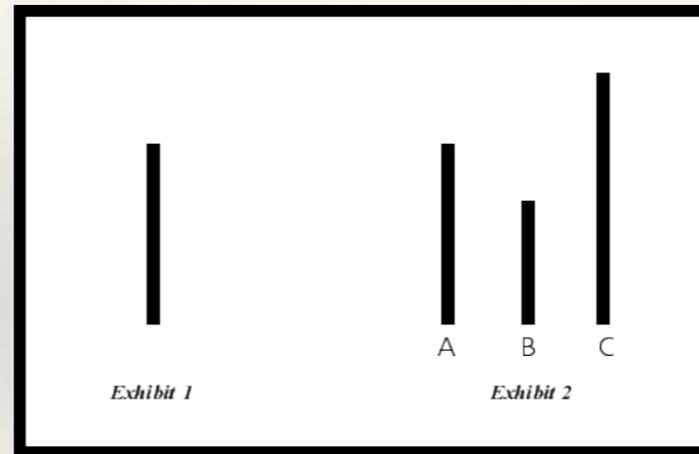


<http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2005-11-13/shoot-the-focus-group>

“Perhaps the most common complaint about focus groups is that consumers are not honest in front of other people. America Online Inc. () in 2003 saw a disconnect between what men revealed in groups and the complaints about spam it received by e-mail. It turned out that men, in a room with strangers, were not keen to admit they didn't have full command of their laptops. But in e-mails, they conceded that they were tortured by underperforming spam blockers.”

"There's peer pressure in focus groups that gets in the way of finding the truth about real behavior and intentions," — the connection between what people say and what they do (but perhaps focus group is being put to poor use if this is the assumption)
new product failure rate of 90%!

Conformity Study (Asch 1952)



"a minority of one in a unanimous majority"

Addressing conformity problems

- ❖ **Nominal Group Technique** – write down ideas about a topic and then read and discuss
- ❖ **Delphi Method** – write down response, collected by the facilitator, posted for public reading, then discussed.

Addressing conformity problems

- ❖ Who *not* to put together in a group
- ❖ On sensitive topics - create more homogenous groups (all HIV+ people, all women, etc.)
- ❖ Combine focus groups with individual interviews (a way to 'triangulate' responses)

- don't put bosses and subordinates together in a focus group if you are interested in gathering everyone's opinion around work related topics

Addressing artificiality problems

- ❖ Using existing groups (rather than strangers)
 - ❖ Families
 - ❖ Social organizations
- ❖ [video example – please observe social dynamics]

Expert Interviews

Interviewing: 'object' of interest

- ❖ An event (use narrative interviews)
- ❖ An individual (use in-depth individual interviews)
- ❖ An issue and the range of views about it (*individual or group interviews*)
- ❖ A complex process or system (use expert interviews)

What is an 'expert?'

- ❖ Person who is responsible for the development, implementation or control of solutions / strategies / policies
- ❖ Person who has privileged access to information about groups or decision processes

[Meuser & Nagel]

Expert Interviews: advantages

- ❖ Don't worry as much about swaying their responses – can challenge them
- ❖ Can be highly motivated and interested in your understanding the process / problem + often like to talk
- ❖ May be well networked – help you find other contacts

Expert Interviews: disadvantages

- ❖ May be invested in existing power relations. Those in powerful positions who take up the role of 'expert' may have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. May conceal or fail to disclose certain relevant, important matters.
- ❖ Short on time, hard to schedule meetings with. Often unique or irreplaceable.

Expert Interviews: interviewer's stance

Types of Interaction, interviewer as:

- ❖ Co-expert
- ❖ Expert outside the field
- ❖ Lay person **
- ❖ Authority
- ❖ Confederate
- ❖ Possible critic

[Bogner and Menz]

Expert Interviews: interviewer's stance

- ❖ Dress professionally
- ❖ Come prepared (prior reading on technical subjects, basic terminology, specific questions on things you don't quite understand)

In Summary

- ❖ Social dynamics in group interviews – *potentially a strength but also can be a liability*
- ❖ Ways of managing conformity problems
- ❖ Ways of managing artificiality of the focus group situation
- ❖ Expert interviews & interviewer's stance – *more preparation required, interactional dynamics may vary substantially from other forms of interviewing*