THE USE OF TELEPHONE FOCUS GROUPS FOR EVALUATION

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Abstract

Similar to most evaluators, I had only ever used face-to-face focus groups in a variety of evaluations that ranged from needs assessments to impact evaluations. Then in 1995 I needed to talk to people who were unlikely to come to a centre. I decided to try focus groups using teleconferencing and was amazed at the quality of the data. Since then I have used the technique many times. This paper examines the technique in detail including how to organise such groups, how the interviewer has to adapt moderation, and the advantages and limitations of the approach. Throughout the paper, comparisons with face-to-face groups are raised.

Introduction

For many years I had carried out face-to-face focus groups as a common evaluation technique. Projects had ranged from finding out the training needs of dieticians to ascertaining how parents select schools for their children, and from evaluating a course to talking to chefs about the use of pork. To be able to do this I had followed the ideas and procedures suggested by authors on the subject such as Morgan and Krueger (1996).

The use of the telephone to carry out such groups had never occurred to me until 1995 when I was asked to lead a statewide needs assessment of the education needs of the over 60s. Funders were keen for me to talk to all kinds of older adults, both those who were undertaking education programs and those who were not. They felt sure I would be able to recruit and run groups with those who were engaged in learning, such as those in the University of the Third Age, the School for Seniors or the Council of Adult Education. However, they felt certain that I would be unable to arrange the 'hard to get to' groups such as the frail, carers or those who live in Housing Commission flats. In response to their cynicism, I dug my heels in and vowed that I would try to get such people involved.

The focus group literature of the time had little or nothing about use of the telephone to cope with such challenges (except for half a page presented by Stewart & Shamdasarni,

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1990:60 and Krueger, 1994:221). Fortuitously, I happened to meet the manager of the Wesley Mission 'Do Care Buddy' program; a telephone link up program for older people, that is mainly used for social contact. I told her of my need and she said; 'I can arrange link ups for you. How about one group down the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne and one down the West? And I can get you people who are on educational programs and others who are not, as we run all kinds of educational activity down the phone (such as German, a telephone choir and the history of Collins St!). Interviews were arranged for the following Saturday evening and Sunday morning and I ran them from home with a note-taker on the upstairs line and me leading the interview downstairs. Amongst the interviewees was an 86 year old woman who had been the chief archivist of the ABC in the 1930s and extremely mentally alert (although now very frail), and an 84 year old man who kept the rest of the group amused with frequent jokes. At the end of the interviews they all said that it had been *"fantastic to have an intellectual discussion from our homes."* and I felt that it had enabled the acquisition of an excellent set of data.

After the project I returned once more to face-to-face interviews until another evaluation arose involving the (then) Overseas Services Bureau. They were quite happy with the procedures for sending out volunteers to work overseas but were dissatisfied with coming home procedures. They wanted me to talk to groups of returned volunteers about how to improve the procedures for returning to Australia. They began negotiating logistics such as where interviews would be held around the country and about when I would be free to travel. At this point I called a halt to proceedings and suggested, that instead of expensive plane fares, hotel accommodation and the prospect of trying to lure people into major centres it would be much simpler to hold telephone groups. They were pleased at this more economic and easier solution. Consequently, one Wednesday evening, for example, I found myself talking to an engineer in Darwin, a weaver from New South Wales, a teacher in Hobart and a farmer on a remote farm in Queensland. Once again the interview series proved most successful.

By this time I decided that this form of focus group was to be favoured for certain populations, especially when it was difficult to get people to come to an interviewing centre. So other examples where I have decided to use this approach have been:

• with bank managers across Australia to discuss how to improve staff training. Such busy people are extremely difficult to synchronise at a central venue so I asked the Bank what would be a good time to catch such staff by phone. They replied that the best time would be at the end of the working day. Armed with that advice I found it was no problem to obtain groups who would sink into their office chairs and talk for an hour on their office phones from 5-6pm. At the same time this and the previous example had confirmed Krueger's observation that; *"the telephone focus group offers the advantage of allowing participants to interact over distances at a fraction of the cost of transporting the same people to a central location."* (1994:221)

• with the new Hospital-in-the Home nurses about how their role has evolved and what training was needed. Only a few of these nurses exist around the State and some work in rural areas. While it would have been easy just to talk to groups of metropolitan nurses, it

seemed important to include nurses right across the State and so phone groups were set up.

• with those suffering from lymphoedema to discuss Statewide services. Once again it was important to organise interviews about this condition across both rural and metropolitan areas and phone interviews were the best way to achieve this.

A Surprising Lack of Associated Literature

So what are the major features of this technique? And what seem to be to the advantages and disadvantages of using telephone focus groupsz? Surprisingly, very little has been written to answer these questions. For instance, Cooper et al. (2003) recently searched the medical and social science literature in seven databases to find what researchers have to say about employing telephone focus groups. They found only thirteen studies had been reported and twelve of these concerned health projects. And amongst the thirteen studies, only five had used telephone focus groups as the major/sole way to collect data (Appleton et al 2000a, 2000b, MacMahon & Patton, 2000, Ruef, 1997, Ruef & Turnbull, 2001, White et al. 1994, White and Thomson, 1995, Wright et al., 2002) However, none of these addressed any methodological issues to any extent except to say that the technique is useful to overcome geographical remoteness.

So how are such groups organised and run, what advantages do they provide, what are their limitations and are these limitations justified? The remainder of this paper attempts to answer some of these questions.

Organisation of Interviews

Telephone focus groups can be conducted at various levels of sophistication. At a basic level they can be run in the same way as a simple conference call (and this is how I run them). For these, any ordinary telephone, cordless phone or speakerphone can be used.

However, it is possible to use more sophisticated equipment where it is possible to have a console with lights, name tags to identify those speaking, special switching devices that only allow one person to speak at a time and a device to measure how long people have spoken for. Thus the moderator is able to draw out quiet participants just as in a more typical group. Unfortunately, such devices cost thousands of dollars and are out of the price range for most research projects.

Once one has recruited (as for normal focus groups) and sent a confirmation letter, it is quite simple to organise the conference type call. I always use Telstra 'Conferlink'. With at least 24 hours notice the telephone company is provided with the names and numbers of those to be interviewed as well as the number of the interviewer and note taker. Other information to be provided includes the organization or number where the bill will be sent, whether the interview is to be taped and, if so, the address to where the tape should be sent.

Next the participant is given a reminder call the day before the session. Then at the time of interview the telephone conference organiser rings the interviewer first and asks whether everything is ready because they have already linked up all interviewees. At this point they also tell the interviewer whether everyone is on the line or not and, if not, keep trying the missing person/people while the interview is in progress. They then take a roll call, give a number to ring and conference call number in case there are any technical problems, tell the participants that the discussion will be taped and then asks the interviewer to go ahead.

I, as the interviewer, always introduce myself and also tell people that there is a note-taker, on the line, who is then introduced. This avoids potential ethical problems. I also repeat that the interview will be taped and that the only people to listen to the tape will be the interviewer or note-taker, who, of course, will have heard it all already! If there are more than four people I also ask for people to say their name each time before speaking. While this may sound cumbersome, I have found that people are excellent at fulfilling this request.

At the end of questioning I often let the interviewees have ten minutes free conversation. This allows them to discuss anything of interest that has cropped up during the interview. For instance, in the lymphoedema interviews many people gave names and addresses associated with local support groups or where to buy special support garments. Then quite often, if members of groups know each other it also allows them to catch up on news and family matters. This happened with the bankers who had often trained or worked together but had then been posted to opposite sides of the country.

Once the interview is over, I then tell interviewees that the notetaker and I are to stay on line longer to organise ensuing groups. This allows the pair to debrief and to consider some of the major ideas that might have emerged during the conversation.

Meanwhile, the telephone company look after the tape. It is labelled with date, time and name of project and sent in an express bag that is delivered to the transcriber within the next 24 hours. In the course of many interviews over ten years I have never yet had a tape go astray.

Other things to think about include:

• Only recruit four to six people for an interview. This is smaller than for a face-to-face interview but seems to work well (Krueger &Casey, 2002:2). Quite often you can recognise that number of voices quite quickly and this may negate the need for people to announce their names each time they speak.
• Thinking of ways to respond such as; 'That's interesting', 'Thank you for that' and so on as there is no way to show your interest by body language, such as nodding, that is used in face-to-face groups.

Advantages of the Telephone Focus Group

I have found telephone groups to be advantageous in many ways:

• They can provide *"the richness of group interaction desired with people who cannot be easily brought together face-to face"* (Silverman, 1994). This occurs because of:

      -wide geographical dispersal

This is the most common reason for using telephone focus groups. For example, they were used for contacting hospital-in-the home nurses across Victoria (Hurworth, 1996) and in discussions with school counsellors across Queensland (McMahon & Patton, 2000).

Others not likely to come to a centre are those who are:

      -hard to recruit because of busy schedules (e.g. GPs, high level executives)
      -ill or housebound (Hurworth, 1995)
      -'rare on the ground' e.g. state emergency managers, those with less common medical conditions (Hurworth, 2004)

• They offer an increased level of anonymity. With this in mind, White and Thomson (1995) thought that an investigation into physicians' relationships with patients would be easier by phone. Similarly, in relation to doctors, Silverman described how:

> *Physicians have a lonely job. They operate under conditions of information overload, high expectations and extreme ambiguity and uncertainty. They want to but can't discuss their mistakes, knowledge gaps and doubts so that they can learn from each other. They need to 'let their hair down' with their peers but can't afford to do so with people in their immediate area. During telephone focus groups, we discovered that physicians are willing even to discuss how they have killed people by using inappropriately high dosages of medications, how they have treated patients incorrectly and, how they cut corners from accepted practice and where they are uncomfortable with gaps in their knowledge.*
> (Silverman, 1994:6)

• For the interviewee and interviewer there is no need to travel to a central venue. This means there is no need for any party to move from the office, place of work or home. This in turn results in:
      -no expensive travel
      -no expense in relation to venue hire
      -no need for refreshments
      -no need to 'dress up' for the occasion (in fact I have carried out interviews from home in dressing gown and slippers!)

I have also found that not needing to move means that many interviews can be held out of the usual 9-5 work hours. For example, I have held many interviews at 6 or 8 o'clock on a Saturday evening or 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning. While most people would baulk

at those times to go out for an interview, they are quite willing to give up an hour to talk at those sorts of times if they do not have to move from home. Furthermore, because of convenience and ease, the acceptance rates to participate tend to be higher and the eventual participation rate is high. (Face-to-face interviews are notorious for people saying they will be there and then not showing up).

• The work tends to be completed more quickly i.e. it seems to be quite easy to carry out a number of groups over a few days while this would be more difficult and exhausting if run face-to-face.

• They are held in a more natural way . People are used to talking on the phone every day whereas bringing them to a venue creates an unnatural event

• They are easier to control than face-to-face groups

• If negotiated (and you tell participants for ethical reasons) you can allow the commissioner(s) of the focus groups to listen in to the conversations to hear what people are saying. This is the auditory equivalent to market researchers using a two-way mirror to observe interviews.

• There is less necessity to pay interviewees. People talking for an hour on their home or office phones are less likely to expect payment. Meanwhile those who come in for interviews these days expect to receive at least their 'out-of-pocket' expenses , if not more, for the inconvenience of time taken to travel and take part at a central venue.

As a result of such savings telephone groups tend to be considerably cheaper to run than face-to-face groups and therefore are most cost-effective. It also means that you can conduct them in as many locations as there are participants. So, if you have five respondents they can come from five different towns, states or even countries.

Quality of Data

• With tapes recorded on the best equipment available to the telephone company this often means that the sound quality is often better than the original phone call

• I have found the quality and amount of data to be as good as, if not better than, the face-to-face interview. This has been confirmed by others who have reported that telephone focus groups *"have been shown to be uncannily accurate in identifying and defining the most important opinions, attitudes, concerns and priorities of stakeholder groups."* (GuideStar Communications, 2003:1). One reason is because there can be a greater degree of openness due to anonymity in the interviews, especially where people have never met one another. This allows people to be emotional and personal because the lack of visual contact, together with the ordinariness of telephone conversation creates a kind of psychological distance and (therefore) safety. Therefore they are also ideal for dealing with more sensitive or difficult topics.

As Silverman concurs:

> *Telephone groups are ideal to create safety for sensitive topics. In some ways they are better then individual interviews because of the group support effect .. The openness of people in telephone groups is legendary… The pull to participate, extraordinary. It is hard to sit on the phone without talking…People have compared the same groups of teenagers on the phone versus face-to-face focus groups and have found that the teenagers were much more comfortable talking on the phone. The production was much higher, gender groups could be mixed and phone groups were superior.* (Silverman, 2003:4)

Another reason for good quality information is that, unlike the face-to-face interview, there is not the same tendency to talk over the top of one another. On telephones people are much more likely to talk one at a time and to feel that whoever is talking is talking to them personally. Thus on telephones no fragmentary, side conversations are possible and conversation is not 'lost' as can happen in the face-to-face group when several people are talking at once.

Arguments Against Perceived Limitations

The Method is Not Widely Accepted
While face-to-face focus groups are almost totally recognised as an evaluation tool, telephone groups have yet to be widely accepted. Clients often have not heard about, or considered them and so are usually sceptical –that is, until they have tried them! Then they are 'sold on the idea'!

Discussion May Be Less Spontaneous
Krueger (1994) suggests that the use of a telephone stifles discussion and that therefore there is a lack of the spontaneity and creativity found in face-to-face groups. I have never found this—in fact it is usually the case that you have to curtail conversations rather than having to push them along and very rich conversation can occur.

There is No Possibility of Seeing Body Language
Some writers criticise the approach because you can't see people's body language or facial expressions (Krueger & Casey, 2002). They feel that such non-verbal communication can be critical for determining when further questions or probing is needed but I would respond to this by saying a) that in most evaluative work we are looking for factual information, b) that the voice anyway can convey a wide range of emotion and other messages through sarcasm, sighing, laughing, emphasis, types of inflection, speed of speech, hesitancy, speaking calmy or angrily and so on, c) people on a phone have to verbalise what in face-to-face interview may merely be a nod of the head. Finally, as Silverman (1994) points out; *"If this is the only way to get participants, the lack of the visual is not a high price to pay".*

<u>It's Harder for the Moderators to Control the Group</u>
Researchers such as Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) claim that the moderator's role is made harder because it is more difficult to control participants, to quiet dominant speakers and to recognise less active group members. I have never found it any more difficult to run than the face-to-face interview. In fact people are extremely polite and good at turn-taking.

<u>The Moderator Needs to Have Particular Qualities</u>
While the face-to-face interviewer needs to have strong interpersonal and group process skills the telephone interviewer who cannot be seen, has to have extra ability in projecting friendliness, naturalness and informality and in being able to fill any 'gaps'. Consequently, Krueger and Casey (2002: 5) point out that one of the major challenges for the telephone moderator is to keep the conversation moving along and so, during long pauses, will need to say: 'I'd like to hear more comments about this' or 'Perhaps there is more that could be added here.'

<u>Claims that There is no Possibility of Using Stimuli</u>
Some suggest that the use of photos, cartoons, pictures etc, which help to stimulate some kinds of focus group interview, cannot be used during phone focus groups. However, I have sometimes mailed or faxed out material in advance or have material ready on the Web for people to access from computers near their phones.

Conclusion

Technology in its various forms is making an impact on evaluation. One way is through teleconference focus groups. They can: expand the pool of participants so that those dispersed geographically or are otherwise difficult to reach can take part; allow greater flexibility in scheduling; increase anonymity thereby encouraging the discussion of sensitive topics; and be cheaper to run than traditionally run groups.

In addition, there has been a long-term belief that, due to the lack of visual cues, telephone groups can only be second best. From what I have experienced, I can only corroborate Silverman's conclusions (1994:15, 18) that; *"it is precisely the lack of the visual element which creates the conditions that allow telephone focus groups to be better than face-to-face ones"* and as a consequence it is possible that *"most focus groups will be conducted that way in the future"*.

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