6 Analyzing Focus Group Results

WHAT LIES AHEAD

In this chapter we describe:

- The Purpose Drives Analysis
- Understanding Analysis
- How Focus Group Analysis Is Different
- The Analysis Process
- Forms of Data
- Preparing Focus Group Transcripts
- The Classic Analysis Strategy
- Analyzing Via Computer
- Analytic Frameworks
- Some Tips to Consider

The analyst has an obligation:

> Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study. (Patton, 2002, p. 434)

This is a story of what data analysis is not:

> Once upon a time, an institution of higher learning set out to hire a new president. The governing board of the institution sought applications from far and near but, because of

> the limited travel budget, only the near applications were considered. It turned out that three professors were among the final candidates to be interviewed by the board. The first was a professor of accounting, the second was a professor of engineering, and the third was a professor who regularly served as a management consultant. After completing all interviews, the board was deadlocked. In an attempt to resolve the dilemma, the board decided to invite all three professors back to answer one final question.
>
> The accounting professor was the first to be asked, “What is two plus two?”
>
> The professor immediately replied, “With great confidence I can tell you that the answer is exactly four.”
>
> The engineering professor was the second candidate to be asked, “What is two plus two?”
>
> After a moment of reflection, the engineer replied, “In the field of engineering, we are accustomed to problems such as this. We frequently must deal with numbers that are rounded. Therefore, the first two could be any number between 1.50 and 2.49, and the same is true of the second number. This means that the sum of two plus two could be any number between 3.00 and 4.98.”
>
> Finally, the board invited the management consultant into the boardroom and asked, “What is two plus two?”
>
> The consultant slowly got up from the chair and went over to shut the door, then over to the window to close the blinds, and finally back to the board table. The consultant leaned across the table and with a low voice, slightly over a whisper, asked, “What do you want it to be?”

Qualitative analysis is not whatever you want it to be. Unfortunately that is a perception some people hold. The intent of this chapter is to present an overview of focus group analysis—analysis that is practical, systematic, and verifiable.

The Purpose Drives Analysis

Throughout the analysis process, remember the purpose of the study. The purpose will guide the direction, depth, and intensity of analysis. Difficulties emerge in both qualitative and quantitative analysis when there is a mismatch between analysis resources and the problem. This can result in elaborate analysis of trivial data or inadequate analysis of a complex problem of major concern. The researcher must remember the intent of the study and regularly weigh choices against two factors: available resources and the value of more in-depth analysis.

We know beginning qualitative researchers who have been overwhelmed with the vast quantity of data and distracted by all the details. Some have a hard time getting started because the task seems daunting. Some get started but can’t decide what to pay attention to—everything seems interesting. Everything might have potential. They get distracted. If you get bogged down or stuck, go back to the plan for the study and reread the purpose. This should help you decide how to move forward. If that doesn’t work, talk to colleagues.

PURPOSE, PURPOSE, PURPOSE

BACKGROUND

This chapter is about analysis—identifying themes. So have you picked up on this theme? Throughout the book, we keep pointing to purpose. That's because the purpose is our guiding star. If we follow it, it keeps us on track. If we are clear about it all along the way, we are more efficient and effective at getting the needed information. The purpose influences everything. It guides the planning. It suggests how much time and resources should be put into the study. It gives us clues as to what type of people should be recruited to participate. It guides the development of the questions. It helps the moderator know what to focus on. It helps us set the analytic framework. And it helps the analyst separate the wheat from the chaff. We emphasize this because beginning researchers sometimes get so excited about all the different things they could learn from a study or all the fascinating things that are said in focus groups that they get lost. Our focus on purpose doesn't mean we aren't open to different things. We don't put blinders on. But we know when we are looking at something beyond the purpose, and we weigh the potential benefit of exploring it.

Understanding Analysis

There are four critical qualities of focus group analysis: It is systematic, verifiable, sequential, and consequential. Let's examine each of these.

Analysis Is Systematic

Systematic analysis means you follow a prescribed, sequential process. The process is deliberate and planned—not capricious, arbitrary, or spontaneous. Systematic analytic procedures help ensure that findings reflect what was shared in the groups. Processes could vary from one study to another, but they are always systematic.

We use systematic protocol to avoid making mistakes or overlooking critical factors. Consider the process used by a commercial pilot in preparing for takeoff. Even though the pilot has flown hundreds of times and can remember each step in the takeoff sequence, systematic procedures are followed faithfully—because takeoff procedures are complex and lives are at risk. Knowing that pilots follow strict procedures helps us trust that they are doing their jobs correctly and that we are safe. Systematic protocol reminds the focus group analyst of upcoming steps and communicates to the users of the study that the analyst attempted to be logical and orderly.

Systematic analysis means that the analysis strategy is documented, understood, and can be clearly articulated by each member of the research team. You are ready for the question, "How did you come up with that?" You can describe the process. You can point to the trail of evidence at the drop of a hat. The process is transparent and open for inspection.

Analysis Is Verifiable

Your analysis is verifiable if another researcher can take your data and arrive at similar findings. As humans, we tend to selectively hear comments that confirm our point of view and to miss or avoid information that we don't understand or that causes us dissonance. Our training, our backgrounds, and our experiences influence what we notice and what we attend to. Researchers must be careful to avoid the trap of selective perception. Verification in analysis is a critical safeguard.

To verify findings, there must be sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence. The data stream begins with field notes and recordings taken during each focus group and at each debriefing and includes transcripts if used.

TIP

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THE DEBRIEFING

Here are some questions that you might consider when conducting the debriefing:

- What were the themes?
- What are the most important points that we've learned from this group?
- What was surprising or unexpected?
- What quotes were particularly helpful?
- How was this group similar to or different from earlier groups?
- Does anything need to be changed before the next group?

Analysis Is Sequential

Analysis is a sequential process—an evolving process of enlightenment. Good analysis begins with good planning, recruiting, questions, and moderating:

- Groups must be configured in a way that allows for the type of analysis that is wanted. The study design begins to emerge by making decisions about the needed qualities of focus group participants. Again, if you want to analyze how women versus men feel, you need separate groups based on gender to make statements with confidence.
- Information-rich participants must be identified and recruited. Otherwise, you will be analyzing the wrong data.
- The questions must be written with analysis in mind. Which questions are key? Which questions deserve the most time? If we don't have unlimited time for analysis, should we frame the questions in ways that take less time to analyze?
- The moderator must understand what will be helpful to the analyst, for example, that the later questions are the most important, that deep description is usually more helpful than simple phrases, that ending questions help nail down the main points of

participants, and that a short verbal summary at the conclusion of the discussion allows for verification.

The analysis sequence continues after the focus group with an immediate debriefing with the moderator and assistant moderator. At this time, the moderator makes a quick check to ensure the recorder worked and that the field notes are complete. Then the moderator turns the audio recorder back on and the team discusses what they heard.

The analytic sequence continues but may take a number of different paths from here.

Analysis Is Continuous

Focus group analysis is different from quantitative analysis in a number of ways. One distinctive difference is when analysis begins. When analyzing numbers, the typical strategy is for the researchers to wait until most forms, surveys, or documents are obtained. When everything is available, or at least a reasonable amount is available, data entry begins. At a certain point, data collection and entry stops, and analysis begins. The separation between collection and analysis is clear in quantitative studies. By contrast, focus group analysis begins in the first focus group. Data collection and analysis are concurrent.

Doing analysis as you go improves data collection in focus groups. Consider scheduling focus groups so you can transcribe one group before conducting the next. (Or review the field notes and listen to the audio recording if you aren't using transcripts.) Also consider writing a short summary of the group, going question by question. This can help to spot whether you need to get more information on a particular question. You will see where the group didn't really answer a question so you can be alert to that in the next group. You can spot a question that isn't getting useful information and adapt the question in later groups. You can see where you need more examples or explanation. Analyzing along the way provides opportunities to collect better data. If you wait until all the focus groups are completed before you transcribe or begin to analyze, you've missed a huge opportunity to learn and improve.

How Focus Group Analysis Is Different

There is not one way to do qualitative analysis. There is an umbrella of strategies. Focus group analysis has some subtle differences from analysis of other forms of qualitative data.

As data, speeches, and individual interviews have some similarities, however, speeches are typically premeditated and flow in a more logical form. Speeches are more like essays, written correspondence, or open-ended survey responses in that the speaker or writer can organize his or her thoughts, edit, and revise, thereby presenting a more reflective statement.

Individual interviews are different. The speaker doesn't know the upcoming question and has to present an answer quickly and without the benefit of editing and reflective revision.

Here are some of the features of focus group interviews that have implications for analysis:

Table 6.1 Features of Conversations and Implications for Analysis

Characteristic	Description	Analysis Implication
Spontaneous comments	Participants do not anticipate the questions, and responses are not premeditated. Responses may not be carefully organized or logically presented.	Opinions may not be fully formed and are subject to change. Watch for modifications later in the discussion.
Inconsistent comments	Participants offer different opinions during the course of the focus group	Opinions may be changing, or new insights may result in different points of view. Or if conversation is excessively abstract, the differing points may be the result of ambiguous conversation.
Specific versus general comments	Often in focus groups the comments relate to a specific event or situation and may not be intended to be generalized.	Follow-up questions might be needed to clarify whether a comment can be generalized to other situations.
People change their minds	Participants might persuade others to a particular point of view	Listen for changes in opinion. Ask participants if they have changed their views and seek insights about the cause.
Words used differently	Individuals vary in how they use words.	Listen for words describing important concepts. Are words used in similar ways? Clarify these ambiguous words while you are still in the group. When doing analysis, code similar comments with the same code.
People repeat comments	Occasionally a participant will feel that a point of view needs more emphasis and will repeat the concept several times. Or someone will remember an important point and present it later in the focus group.	Be alert to the difference between frequency and extensiveness. Names on the transcript can be helpful in these situations.
Conversations tend to wander	Conversations wander, go off track, and loop back to previous comments.	The moderator needs to maintain the focus without being too heavy handed. Occasional off-topic conversations can yield insights but also eat up precious time.

Characteristic	Description	Analysis Implication
People present a view with intensity or emotion	Intense emotions in a focus group tend to influence other participants. This intensity is less prevalent and tends to be less influential in other forms of qualitative data.	Watch for indicators of intensity in body language and in comments. Attempt to get comments from participants on how they are feeling and how this influences their views. Examine the field notes for indications of intensity or emotion.

These differences between focus groups and other forms of qualitative data have subtle influence on analysis. Analysis that relies primarily on counting might work in an essay or speech but miss the mark when examining focus group interviews. Some analytic procedures tend to micro-analyze comments that were simply a characteristic of a discussion. For example, in a conversation an individual might overemphasize a relatively minor point if he or she feels the point is being disregarded or discounted by others. The individual takes the dismissal personally and becomes invested in pointing out the logic of the argument. As a result this minor point grows both in intensity and in frequency of discussion, yet it remains a minor point.

In some environments (speeches) we know a considerable amount about the person making statements, and this can influence the analysis. We can look for patterns or trends over time. But in focus groups, we have limited insight into each person's background. As a result body language interpretation is limited, and we don't have a foundation of past statements for comparison.

Focus groups are similar to discussions or conversations that are informal and spontaneous. Some people who like to reflect before they speak may be caught off guard and make statements that they later amend or revise. In these situations the likelihood of inconsistency increases. Participants may be changing their minds, they may be commenting on a specific situation versus a general principle, or they may even hold several seemingly inconsistent views at the same time. A focus group interview reflects a fluid environment not a static presentation.

The Analysis Process

Here is an example of an analytic process for focus group interviews. While we list the steps in numerical sequence, we find that we occasionally modify the order and revisit or change earlier decisions.

As you read this section, you'll notice that, when we describe the analysis process, we go all the way back to planning. It may seem like we have covered this territory. But we include it on purpose. We strongly believe that all these steps are part of good analysis.

1. Decide Who Will Coordinate the Analysis

Early in the study, identify the person who will take leadership for analysis. This person must be intimately involved in the entire study. She or he must have a clear concept of the purpose, be involved in study design, question development, participant selection, and be present in the focus groups. This person might be the moderator or the note taker, but she or he should observe the groups and be well aware of both what is said and how it is said. In our opinion, you can't do first-rate analysis if you weren't in the focus groups.

2. Look Over Your Questions, and Specifically Think About Analysis

(a) Are your key questions clearly identified? These are the questions that are at the heart of your study. Be sure that everyone on the team is aware of these questions. Look over your time estimates for all questions, and be sure you are spending adequate time on your key questions.

(b) Give thought to how you anticipate analyzing each question.

- Are there questions where you want everyone to answer? If so, do you need to keep track and identify the names of the respondents?
- Are there areas where you anticipate intensity and energy in the response? How will you identify this passion or energy?
- Are you interested in knowing if people change their minds during the discussion? If so, how will you identify and track the responses? Or will you just ask them if they changed their opinions?
- If you are using projection, drawings, or other exercises, how will you analyze the results? Will you give respondents a chance to describe their responses?

(c) Are you concerned that early respondents will unduly influence others in the group? If so, ask participants to make a list on paper before responding and then list all responses on a flip chart followed by group discussion.

(d) Are you watchful of words that are different but sound similar? Some words sound similar but can have important differences. For example, words like *helpful*, *useful, valuable, important,* or *practical* can have subtle differences. Words like *rating* and *ranking* are different concepts that are regularly confused. In health studies, *exercise* and *being active* may have different meanings. Use precise language as you ask questions, and listen attentively to the words used by the respondents.

3. Anticipate the Discussion

Conduct a practice group to anticipate what might be said, where probes might be used, and how questions might be answered. The first focus group is always the hardest. You don't know if participants will understand the questions and how engaged they will be in the discussion. Pilot-test the questions with friends, neighbors, and colleagues to get a sense of how questions might be answered. This practice gives you insight as to where you might need probes or follow-up questions as well as the time needed to answer the question.

4. Use Multiple Strategies for Data Capture

Plan your strategy for capturing data. The most common strategy is to use memory, field notes, handouts, and flip charts, along with audio recording. Have you checked your equipment to be sure it is working properly? Have you practiced using it? Do you have the right settings selected on your digital audio recorder? Do you have a strategy for how you plan to file and store each type of data?

5. Work With the Note Taker to Ensure the Right Data Are Captured

The person responsible for note taking should be completely familiar with the questions. Each question should be numbered and the key questions clearly identified. The note taker needs to know if names needs to be linked with comments, if body language is to be described, whether to capture the big ideas or to capture word for word as much of the conversation as possible. If the notes are critical to the analysis, then be extra attentive to the style and format of the notes. And be certain that the note taker is well aware of the purpose of the study.

6. Some Analytic Tasks Occur During the Focus Group

Be attentive to certain circumstances, such as the following:

(a) Identify situations that need further exploration. Use probes and follow-up questions.

Listen for special moments that might be particularly insightful:

- Someone changing his or her mind
- Someone showing emotional intensity
- A subtle change in group energy or enthusiasm
- Participants appearing to lose interest

In these situations, attempt to get comments from the participants that explain the behavior or reaction.

(b) If superlative language is used, you might seek out an indication of degree. For example, suppose someone says, "This was an outstanding program!" or "It was really wonderful!" You might ask them to put their response on a 10-point scale with 10 being the very best and 1 being the very poorest. And you might invite others in the group to respond as well. Consider having them jot down their responses on pieces of paper before they announce the numbers. Interestingly, some people will use superlative language to denote normal and ordinary occurrences.

(c) Use an ending question that asks each person to identify what they consider to be the most important topic discussed. These round-robin questions at the conclusion of the group give the analyst a sense of where participants are placing importance. This insight may suggest the order in which the results are depicted in the final report.

(d) Offer an ending summary and ask for verification. Briefly overview the key points of the discussion in two minutes or less, and ask participants if this summary is an accurate overview of the important points. Invite anyone to amplify or elaborate.

7. Debrief Soon After Group

The research team should conduct a 15- to 30-minute debriefing after participants leave the room. This gives the researchers a chance to compare notes, share highlights, and consider what others on the team have observed or heard. Audio record the debriefing. If an oral or written report is needed following the group, this team might outline the key points.

8. List, File, Copy, and Document All Materials

Organize your data immediately. If rating sheets or drawings were produced during the group, they should be identified by group and placed in the file. Catalog and file flip charts, field notes, and seating diagrams. Label and back up digital audio recordings. Consider photographing flip charts and drawings produced in the groups.

9. Decision: Should You Transcribe?

Likely this decision has been made earlier, but now is the time to review and adjust the decision. The decision is one of these options:

(a) Prepare a full transcript

(b) Prepare an abridged transcript

(c) Transcribe selected quotes

(d) Just listen to the audio recording

(e) Not listen and not transcribe but keep the documents on file

In most research situations, it is important to be consistent across all focus groups. This is also a wise strategy for beginning analysts. But in evaluation studies the analyst is acutely aware to the time and resources needed and may decide to use a mixed approach. In some studies, we planned to do analysis based on field notes, but after listening to a particular focus group, the research team decided we needed a complete transcript to accurately capture the nuances of the conversation. In other large studies, we anticipated using full transcripts of all the groups, but we reached saturation early. We used complete transcripts for the early groups but only transcribed selected quotes from the final groups.

If you decide not to use a transcript, then your analytic process is based on data derived from memory, field notes, and debriefings.

10. Begin the Coding Process

Now the sorting begins. Coding consists of placing similar labels on similar things. The task is to sort comments into similar categories. This job is best performed by several people working together. Take the first transcript. Read the entire transcript. Then select the first question you want to analyze. (You may not want to analyze the opening question.) Examine the first response. If it is an answer to the question, then give it a title or code that describes the comment. Examine the second response, and if it is a similar answer, give it the same code. If it differs, give it another code that best describes the response. This process continues with all responses until the data are exhausted, and then the researcher moves on to the next question. (We describe this process in more detail later in this chapter. Look for the section titled The Classic Analysis Strategy.) This technique is called the *constant comparative method,* based on the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), and is described in their classic work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

When all data have been coded, the researcher prepares a statement that describes the findings.

11. Prioritizing the Analytic Themes

When the data have been categorized, the researcher begins preparing the written analytic report. The constant comparative strategy gives the analyst a sense of the frequency of themes, but the analytic process is more than arriving at the number of times a comment was said. At this stage the analyst gives thought to a cluster of concepts:

- Frequency—How often was a concept mentioned?
- Extensiveness—How many different people mentioned the concept?
- Intensity—How much passion or force was behind the comments?
- Specificity—How much detail was provided by respondents?
- Internal consistency—Did individual participants remain consistent in their views?
- Participant perception of importance—Did participants cite this as an important concept?

The task of the analyst is to develop an analytic report that grows out of the purpose of the study. It could involve arranging the concepts in a descending order based on the above-mentioned analytic factors. Or it could take other approaches, such as documenting how opinions change in the process of the conversation, presenting the logical arguments for action, or the developing thought processes of the participants.

12. Write the Report

The typical report contains these elements:

1. Cover page
2. Executive summary
3. Table of contents
4. Purpose and procedures (background)
5. Findings
6. Interpretations
7. Recommendations or suggestions
8. Appendix

But most researchers write the sections in this order:

1. Purpose and procedures (background)
2. Findings by themes or questions
3. Recommendations or suggestions
4. Executive summary
5. Cover page
6. Table of contents
7. Appendix

The executive summary is prepared near the end. By this time some researchers are ready to be done with the project and don't put much time or energy into the executive summary. This is a mistake. The executive summary may be the only part of the report that ever gets read by some people. Take your time. Make it shine. The first paragraph should grab people.

Forms of Data

As we said before, data can be captured in different forms as the basis for analysis: transcripts, abbreviated transcripts, notes, and memory. Each of these provides a different level of specificity, detail, and completeness. Some studies require the highest level of detail for quality analysis. Other studies can be highly effective with much less detail.

Transcript Based

Transcript-based analysis uses complete transcripts of the focus groups as a basis for analysis. The transcripts are prepared using the audio recording of the focus group. These transcripts can be supplemented with field notes taken by researchers. Soon after a focus group is conducted, the analyst or a typist completes the transcript, which could easily be 30 to 40 pages of single-spaced text. The transcript of a two-hour focus group can require anywhere from 4 to 12 hours to prepare.

Transcript-based analysis is useful for studies being conducted in academic settings, for complex studies, and for studies where the risk of being wrong is high. The disadvantage of transcript-based analysis is that it requires more resources than other methods.

Abridged Transcript

Abridged transcript-based analysis is slightly less time-consuming than the transcript-based strategy. This approach relies on listening to an audio recording of each focus group and developing an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the discussion. Instead of a 30- to 40-page complete transcript, the abridged transcript might consist of only 10 to 30 pages. It is an abbreviated transcript; only relevant conversation is included. The introduction and first question are not transcribed. Excessive moderator directions are not transcribed. Comments that don't directly relate to the purpose of the study are not transcribed. Only someone who thoroughly understands the purpose of the study can develop an abridged transcript. Some comments may seem irrelevant or redundant to those who do not understand the purpose of the research. Or they may think an abridged transcript is like taking minutes of a meeting (it isn't). This abridged transcript should be prepared by a member of the research team, preferably the analyst. In essence, the researcher is doing analysis while listening to the recording and transcribing only those comments that will be useful in analysis. One must consider whether it is more efficient and cost-effective to pay for complete transcripts or to have the analyst create abbreviated transcripts.

Note Based

Note-based analysis relies mainly on field notes. The focus group might have also been audio recorded, but the audio is only used as a backup or to clarify confusing aspects of the notes.

The quality of the note-based approach is directly related to the ability of the assistant moderator to capture relevant notes. For this reason, it is often beneficial for the assistant moderator to also serve as the analyst. See the discussion of note taking in Chapter 5.

Note-based analysis may be sufficient when the purpose of the study is narrowly defined, for example, when pilot-testing ideas or materials or when the decisions to be made are low budget and easily reversible. The great advantage of the note-based analysis is speed.

Memory Based

Memory-based analysis requires considerable skill and experience and has substantial potential for error in the hands of a novice. It is best left to professionals. This type of analysis is used by professional moderators in special focus group rooms with one-way mirrors. After the focus group, the moderator goes to the back room and offers a memory-based summary of the critical points. The moderator may have made a few sketchy notes, but the summary is largely from memory.

This type of analysis unquestionably lends itself to those studies where the results are rather clear-cut, such as a choice between products or the potential success of a new product. The strategy also works better when the focus group questions are concrete.

This first report is oral (it may be followed with a written report) and allows time for questions and reflections from the clients who watched the focus group.

Preparing Focus Group Transcripts

Preparing focus group transcripts is a time-consuming ordeal, and yet it is an important phase of producing quality analysis. How the transcript is prepared can have a profound effect on the later analysis. There is some confusion about what a transcript is. This is what a focus group transcript is NOT:

- a summary
- minutes of a meeting
- an edited and corrected summary
- a document prepared by looking at the field notes

A focus group transcript IS:

- a word-for-word written record of the focus group discussion, based on the audio recording

Consistent formatting will allow the reader to navigate the document quickly. Everything the moderator says should be bolded, capitalized, or underlined. This enables the reader to quickly scan the document and locate the discussion on specific questions. Comments of participants are single-spaced, with double spacing between speakers. When preparing the transcript, don't worry about punctuation. Often, people speak in incomplete sentences. Use punctuation where it seems to make sense. Place periods at what seem to be the ends of sentences.

Type comments word for word. If someone repeats what was said earlier, be sure to type it again. Don't change the words or correct the grammar. If some of the words are unintelligible, type three periods ". . ." to indicate that words are missing from the transcript. Number all pages. Place a header on all pages indicating date and group name.

Note any special or unusual sounds that could help analysis. Use parentheses to indicate laughter, loud voices, shouting, someone being interrupted, or long pauses. We suggest leaving out verbal pauses such as *umm* or *ah*.

We believe that the person coordinating the analysis should prepare the transcripts. We are aware that this is a time-consuming task, but it allows the researcher to get an in-depth experience with the data. By transcribing our own focus groups, we have improved our moderating in subsequent focus groups. Yes, we know that it is far easier to hire a transcriptionist. And in some situations this may be a preferable option. But in situations where there is complexity and care is needed in the analysis, the safest strategy is for analysts to prepare their own transcripts.

SPEEDING UP THE TRANSCRIPTION PROCESS

TIP

Special equipment can greatly speed up transcribing. Transcription kits that include foot pedals and special software can plug into your computer and allow you to control the playback speed with a foot device. The software allows you to regulate the speed of playback to match your keyboard skills. Other software features include noise reduction and elimination of other background sounds. Check the website of your digital audio recorder for more information.

Another way to speed up the transcription process is to use voice recognition software. This software will transcribe a voice into words in your word processor. But note that this software will not recognize the variety of different voices in the focus group. It will only identify the voice for which it is trained. So here is how it has been used:

- The focus group is recorded on a digital audio recorder.
- The voice recognition software is trained to the voice of the transcriber.
- The transcriber listens to the audio recording with earphones—often at a slower speed.
- The transcriber turns on the voice recognition software and using a microphone repeats everything that was said at the focus group (this includes the comments of the moderator as well as the other participants). The transcriber leaves a space between different speakers and bolds the comments of the moderator.

Note: This will seem awkward at first, but after several hours of practice, your speed will increase. Also, we've used this method for preparing translations of focus groups from other languages into English.

Give thought to when you begin and end the transcript. Typically, the audio recorder is turned on before the focus group begins and then turned off after the participants have left the room. You may not need to transcribe the introduction to the focus group, and usually we end the transcript when the discussion ends.

The Classic Analysis Strategy

The classic approach is a process that has been used in countless analysis projects. It allows the analyst to identify themes and categorize results. It is low-tech. It isn't elegant or sophisticated looking, but it works. And if you've never done qualitative analysis before, this is a great way to start. The process is systematic. It breaks the job down into doable chunks. It helps make analysis a visual and concrete process. Once you have mastered this approach to analysis, you have a better idea of how to adapt the process to other efforts.

This is what you need:

- A room where you can spread out your work and where it can remain undisturbed until you are done with analysis. It helps to have a long table. Lots of floor space will substitute nicely, if you don't mind bending down and you can keep the kids and dogs out of the area. Walls work too if you don't mind taping things to them.
- Two paper copies of each transcript (one to cut up and one for reference)
- Scissors
- Colored marking pens
- Colored paper for printing the transcripts
- Flip chart or newsprint paper

You are going to cut the transcripts apart. But once they are cut into individual quotes, you may want to know where a quote came from originally. Here are a couple of tips that can help you identify where quotes came from after you cut your transcripts into hundreds of little pieces.

Tip 1: *Number each line of each transcript*. Most word processing software has a feature that will do this for you. The line numbers will help you quickly locate a quote within a transcript.

Tip 2: *Print transcripts on different colors of paper*, thereby color coding the transcripts by audience type, category, and so on. For example, let's say your study consists of four focus groups with teachers. You could print each of the four transcripts on a different color of paper. Then you could immediately identify where a quote originated from if you numbered each line (tip 1) and color coded.

But, let's say your study consists of 12 focus groups—4 with students, 4 with teachers, and 4 with parents. Keeping track of 12 colors of paper could be complicated. Instead, you could print all the teachers in blue, the parents in green, and the students on white and then add the following tip.

Tip 3: *Use a marker to identify groups within a type of participant*. Continuing from the previous example, once you have all the teacher groups printed on blue paper, use a marker to draw one line down the left margin of every page of the first teacher group transcript. Then make two lines down the margin of each page of the second teacher group, three down the third, and four down the fourth. Do the same with the parent and student groups. Now if you have a quote on blue paper with three lines down the margin, you know it came from the third teacher group.

Arrange the transcripts in a reasonable order. It could be in the sequence in which the groups were conducted, but more likely it will be by categories of participants or by some demographic screening characteristics of participants. For example, if you did three groups with students, three groups with parents, and three groups with teachers, you would work with all three transcripts of one kind (e.g., students) before moving to the next. This arrangement helps you be alert to changes that may be occurring from one type of audience group to another.

Before cutting, do a quick reading of all transcripts. This quick reading is just to remind you of the whole scope and to refresh your memory of what was said in the groups.

Place flip chart or newsprint paper on long tables, on the floor, or on the walls. Write one of the focus group questions to be analyzed on the top of each page of newsprint. If you had 10 questions to analyze, you now have 10 pages of newsprint surrounding you. You may also want to divide the newsprint page into categories to represent different types of focus group participants. For example, on one part of the page, you could place comments from student focus groups; in another location you could place comments from parent focus groups; and in a third section you could place comments from teacher focus groups.

Now it's time to begin the cutting and categorizing.

Start with the first question you want to analyze. Read each quote, and answer these questions:

1. *Did the participant answer the question that was asked?*

   IF YES → Go to question 3.
   DON'T KNOW → Set it aside and review it later.
   NO → Go to question 2.
   (If you are undecided or unclear about any answers, then take the conservative approach and save the comments for later review.)

2. *Does the comment answer a different question in the focus group?*

   IF YES → Move it to that question.
   IF NO → Put in discard pile (but don't throw the discard pile away until you are done with analysis).
   (Caution: Don't assume that answers will follow the questions. Occasionally, participants will provide answers to questions asked earlier or to questions that have not yet been asked. When this occurs, move the answer to the appropriate location.)

3. *Does the comment say something of importance about the topic?*

   IF YES → Tape it to the newsprint under the appropriate question. (Or if you are working on a horizontal surface, just start a pile.)
   IF NO → Put in discard pile.
   (Tip: Don't use a lot of tape because you will want to move the quotes around later.)

4. *Is it like something that has been said earlier?*

   IF YES → Start grouping like quotes together. Basically, you are making piles (categories) of like things.
   IF NO → Start a separate pile.
   You are constantly comparing and making decisions. Is this similar to or different from other things?

Soon the newsprint page is filling up with participant quotes. Not everything necessarily fits neatly into categories. In focus groups, people regularly get off topic or expand in detail on an aspect of minimal importance to the study. There's a good chance that you won't use this information and you will want to set it aside to clear the clutter, but don't toss these out. Instead, create storage areas so you can later review these quotes again. You might rearrange categories or create new categories and want to review these unused quotes to see if they fit your new categories. Sometimes the storage area is a box in the middle of the room with unused quotes.

When you are done categorizing the quotes from the first question, move to the second. After you've cut up all the transcripts and have your initial categories, you're ready to begin analysis of specific questions. Make sure you have all the quotes that say similar things together. Rearrange until you're satisfied. You might have categories and subcategories. You may get so many quotes about one thing that you make subcategories. Or you may decide to combine categories. You may want to talk with someone else about how you are categorizing certain things. Or you may want to show them. When you've finished arranging quotes into categories, you are ready for the next step.

Go back to each newsprint page, and write a descriptive summary of what each type of group said in response to the question. Write a description of what students said in response to the question. Then write a summary for the parents and then the teachers. Then compare and contrast across groups. How are students, parents, and teachers similar? How are they different? At this point focus on the findings—just describe what was said in the groups. Later you may want to go further and offer an interpretation of what it means or a recommendation.

During this process you will need to decide how much weight or emphasis to give comments or themes. We look at several factors:

- *Frequency*. Although we pay attention to how frequently something is said, it is a mistake to assume that what is said most frequently is most important. Sometimes a really key insight might have been said only once in a series of groups. You have to know enough about what you are studying to know a gem when it comes along. People have trouble with this concept: How could something that was said only once be important? Suppose you are discussing needs in a particular community. One person may be a visionary thinker and identify something that no one else has spotted or thought about yet. This cutting-edge thinking may have only been voiced once in a series of groups, but it may be crucially important to the study.

- *Specificity*. Typically, we consider giving more emphasis to comments that are specific—that provide detail. For example, if we were asking what people dislike about flying, we would give more weight to a quote that described in detail a time when a participant lost her bags, what she did, and what the carrier did than to a comment of "Oh, I hate it when they lose your bags."

- *Emotion*. We typically give more weight to comments or themes where participants show emotion, enthusiasm, passion, or intensity in their answers. Transcripts rarely capture this adequately. You need to be in the groups to see, feel, and hear it.

- *Extensiveness*. Frequency and extensiveness are related but different. Extensiveness is how many different people said something. Frequency is how many times something is said. We have had groups where one person keeps returning to the same theme. Although the theme was mentioned a fair amount, it was brought up by only one person. We pay attention to extensiveness. However, you can identify this only if you were in the groups or you have names on the transcripts.

When you are done writing a descriptive summary for each of the questions, look across the questions to see what themes cut across the questions. Are there things that repeatedly come up? If so, consider structuring your written report around these themes rather than around the questions. Or perhaps some questions can be combined.

Now take a break. Get away from the data for a couple days. This is a chance to refocus your attention on the big picture. What prompted the study? Who's going to use the results, and have you located the information that will be helpful? How can you frame this information so it best conveys what participants shared? It's easy to get sidetracked into fascinating areas of minor importance. After a few days you can go back to conclude the analysis.

When we write a report, we structure it around the questions or the themes. Then we use the summaries we wrote earlier to describe what was said about the question or the theme. If we are writing a narrative report, we then select quotes from those categories that illustrate what was said. The quotes are used as evidence. We look for quotes that capture the essence of what was said. They give the reader an idea of how the participants talked. We typically use about three quotes per category or theme.

When we have completed this level of analysis, we may go on to include our interpretations or recommendations. However, we clearly separate the findings from interpretations and recommendations.

This classic approach has been around a long time, but it is still effective. Quite a number of variations are possible, but the core elements are cutting, sorting, and arranging through comparing and contrasting. The beauty of this approach is that there are manageable steps to take. It makes analysis seem less overwhelming and more doable. It is a way of starting with the specifics (quotes) and working toward bigger themes.

Analyzing Via Computer

Computer programs can help analyze transcripts.

Analysis With Transcripts

Researchers use computers in a variety of ways in focus group analysis. We are aware of three distinct approaches, but likely more exist. For each approach, it is assumed that you have transcripts.

One approach is simply using the word processor as another way to cut and paste. Essentially, it is using the computer to perform the classic analysis described earlier. When used in this way, give thought to the need for tracing the source of each quote. It's easy to cut and paste similar quotes together and then lose sight of where they came from. Sometimes knowing the source is critical. This can be solved by developing a coding system that allows you to identify each quote by group (e.g., font color) or participant.

A second approach is to use something like Excel or Access, employing macros to sort the coded data. Some researchers choose to use software they already own and know how to use. This system may not be as elegant or powerful as the specialized software, but many people have used it successfully.

The third approach is to use software specially designed for qualitative analysis. Two popular programs are ATLAS.ti and NVivo. These programs open the doors for analysis possibilities that are not reasonably possible with other strategies. For example, these programs allow you to nest codes. This means that a chunk of data—a sentence or a longer quote or an interchange between three participants—can be coded in multiple ways. The classic approach limits you to placing quotes in one location, but with these special computer programs, there is no limit. Or, you might want to examine comments from participants with certain demographic characteristics that you've coded into your computer. It can be done with other analysis strategies, but it is difficult and awkward. But don't be confused. These analysis programs don't actually do analysis. They help you deal with large sets of data. You still code the data. And you still make sense of it.

The advantage of these specially developed computer programs is that they help manage large sets of text. It helps an analyst look very carefully at the data. As a result these programs are popular in academic settings. A colleague of ours analyzes sets of focus group data over years to build theory, looking for new or different nuances. Special qualitative software is required for this level of analysis. The downside is the time needed to learn and operate the program. Also, this type of software provides a level of analysis not often needed. Most clients want to know the three to five things they should pay attention to. Special software is not needed for this level of analysis.

Analytic Frameworks

Give thought to various analytic frameworks. These frameworks allow you to examine the problem from different vantage points and have the potential for bringing focus to your analysis. Base your choice of framework on the purpose of the study and what you are seeking to discover. There is no right or wrong framework.

The examples of analytic frameworks in Table 6.2 are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to point out how your data collection strategies and process of analysis will differ depending on the purposes of your study. For example, if you are intent on uncovering factors that might influence change, then you will need note taking strategies that allow you to identify the participants who make each comment. And then you will need to trace that individual's comments throughout the discussion in order to identify indications of consistency or change.

Some Tips to Consider

Suppose that, in the near future, you have to analyze a series of focus groups. What would be the most valuable advice that we could offer? We suggest the following:

Table 6.2 Analytic Frameworks

Analytic Framework	Objective	Typical Uses	Key Task	Process
Constant Comparative	Identify patterns in the data, and discover relationships among ideas or concepts.	Development of theory. Identification of patterns or trends.	Compare one segment of data with another to identify similarities and differences.	(1) Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. (2) This dimension is given a name; it then becomes a category. (3) These patterns are arranged in a relationship to each other.
Identifying Individual Change	Identify change or movement in opinions, preferences, or attitudes. Discover the factors that prompt people to modify or change their views.	Testing out possible ideas or approaches to see which is persuasive or convincing.	Track an individual's comments throughout the course of the focus group.	(1) Watch for indications of stability or movement in the views and opinions of each participant. (2) Incorporate opportunities throughout the interview for participants to share their views. (3) Ask participants at the end of the discussion if they have changed their views.
Critical Incidents	Discover important and critical events that have shaped later decisions or actions as well as the logic and emotional forces that surround the incident. Less emphasis on patterns and more attention on the logic and rationale offered by each individual.	Development of theory. Identifying important ingredients related to success or failure of a program, organization, or concept. Identifying infrequent but important causes or triggering events.	Identify events, actions, or situations that were influential to individuals, organizations, or society.	(1) Ask participants to identify critical incidents. (2) Listen for the logical arguments used in identification of critical events. (3) Observe the manner in which participants describe the events (e.g., passion, intensity). (4) Listen for nuances or special situations that might alter a critical incident.

(Continued)

Table 6.2 (Continued)

Analytic Framework	Objective	Typical Uses	Key Task	Process
Key Concepts	Identify the factors that are of central importance, not critical, but of moderate importance.	Discovery of the core ideas. Understanding of how participants view a topic.	Identify a limited number of important ideas, experiences, or preferences that illuminate the study.	Ask the participants to help identify the key concept—the important lessons learned from the focus group.
Testing Alternatives	Identify the most preferred choice among several alternatives.	Pilot-testing alternative options.	Show participants examples, descriptions, or actual products, and ask them to choose.	(1) Show choices and invite comparison. (2) Encourage participants to identify their choices and then provide reasons.

Know What Is Needed in Your Environment

The approaches to focus group analysis can vary greatly. One form of analysis can be completely acceptable in one setting and inappropriate in another. Analysis for a dissertation is a world apart from analysis for a small, nonprofit agency with a shoestring budget. If this is the first time you've analyzed focus groups, seek advice from colleagues about how similar research has been conducted.

Being There Is Best

Nothing beats being present in the focus group. We highly encourage that analysis be done by someone who was physically present in the room when the focus groups were conducted. It's been estimated that 80 percent of the content is found in the transcript and the remaining 20 percent are all the other things that occur in the room. Being in the groups gives the analyst a sense of the energy, passion, and emotion that doesn't come through in transcripts.

Not Everything Is Worthy of Analysis

Beginning analysts often make the mistake of assuming that they must use all the data. In some focus groups, much of the discussion may be of marginal value. In other groups, almost all the comments are rich and insightful. Certain questions are more important than others, and you must know one from the other. Place your attention on the most relevant conversation.

Much Analysis Is Based on Pattern Identification

An elementary teacher had an interesting way of teaching classification systems. The teacher would bring out a large box full of keys and dump the keys in the center of the room. The teacher told students to arrange the keys. The students would ask questions about how they might do it. The teacher said that there could be many ways and they should think about it and then place the keys in categories. The kids eagerly got into the task, discussing possibilities, comparing strategies, changing directions several times, and then finally coming to agreement about a preferred method. Sometimes they would abandon one method and use something different. It was always an interesting exercise. Some kids would sort the keys by color or metal (brass, iron, nickel), and others would sort by size (small, medium, large), and others by the key type (automotive, house, padlock, luggage). There were no wrong answers, and after a while a student would ask about the purposes of classification systems (the teachable moment!). Was it to arrange keys for future use? Was it for an aesthetic display? The way we categorize depends on our purpose.

Sometimes Pattern Identification Might Not Be Appropriate

In certain situations, such as identifying critical incidents, an event might occur only once and yet be of great consequence. Pay attention to unique or rare events that have major consequences. When reporting results of these occurrences, it is important to convey that it was infrequent and provide a rationale for why you chose to include it in the report.

Beware of Personal Bias and Preexisting Opinions About the Topic

People differ in how they analyze. Some have hunches about what they might find, and when they find evidence that confirms that hunch, they leap to conclusions. Sometimes the leap is premature. Always challenge yourself. Seek evidence that disproves or presents counter-information. Seek insight from colleagues, particularly those with different backgrounds. Be ready to release your grip on an interpretation and embrace alternatives. Be open to multiple realities.

You Are the Voice of the Participants

Consider yourself the voice of the participants. Your task is to communicate clearly how participants felt about the topic. In a way, you are their spokesperson. There may be different voices and multiple views that need to be presented, and your task is to accurately represent the range of views.

Visually Represent the Findings

Give thought to creating a representation of your findings. Sometimes flow charts, matrixes, and diagrams are helpful in depicting results. Other times sketches, drawings, images, cartoons, or analogies are helpful. The visual representation is helpful both in forming the analysis and then later when results are communicated.

Be Cautious With Numbers

We pay attention to frequency, but we are cautious about counting, and we rarely include numbers in reports. Numbers can be misleading in focus group reports. Readers often want to turn numbers into percentages and then project to the population. This is unwise. The sample size is too small. Not everyone answers every question. Some people may comment three times on one issue. Other people may not comment at all. Instead we encourage the use of modifiers like *no one, a few, some, many, most,* or *all* to describe how many people talked about an issue in a particular way.

Be Careful Interpreting Body Language

Interpreting body language is tricky. In a focus group, much can be observed, but the challenge is in interpretation. What does it mean when someone leans forward, slouches, looks out the window, or taps her fingers? Some people will tell you they know what those gestures mean, but do they really? We suggest that you use body language as a signal. Instead of assuming that the participant who is talking fast and raising his voice is passionate about the topic, ask him how he feels. Try to get the individual to express his or her feelings in words. Then you have the concrete language of the participants to use in analysis as opposed to the subjective observation of the researcher. Use phrases like, "You seem concerned about this topic; tell me how you feel." Or "You look like you have an opinion on this. Tell us about it." Or "You look like you are frustrated with this discussion. Are you?"

If you see others nodding their heads in the focus group when one participant argues a particular point, you might say, "I see others nodding their heads. Tell me what that means."

What does laughter mean? (It can mean you are taking great delight in what you are hearing, or it could mean you are cynical and dismissive.) What does it mean when someone changes tone and speed and speaks quietly and slowly? What do tightly crossed arms or legs indicate? (Are you being defensive, or are you cold?) If you were able to observe individuals for a longer period and compare their body language to a baseline, you might be able to make a statement with confidence. The focus group, however, is but a glimpse and is hardly sufficient time to understand the pattern.

So our advice is this: Go easy on reading body language. It is easy to misinterpret the action, especially when conducting cross-cultural or international focus groups.

Should It Be Analyzed as a Conversation or an Interview?

One of the ways in which focus groups can vary is in the degree of conversation that is present. Some focus groups resemble serial interviewing, where all comments are directed back to the moderator. Other focus groups are more like unstructured interviews, where the moderator allows and encourages participants to talk to each other, build on comments of others, and agree or disagree with others. Most focus groups fall somewhere in the middle, often with earlier questions being more directive and later questions more conversational. Which is better? It depends on the purpose of the study. Both can yield insightful information. Conversations take longer, but they have the advantage of observing how individuals respond to others in the group, which might also be a predictor of how they respond when they leave the group. The serial interview is a faster way of obtaining information and is preferred when time is at a premium and when your goal is to understand various points of view. The conversation dialogue allows the researcher to use conversational analysis procedures identified by Harvey Sacks, Paul ten Have, and others (Have, 2007; Sacks & Jefferson, 1995).

Summary

Focus group analysis is a deliberate, purposeful process. It consists of four distinct and critical qualities. It is systematic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in a sequential manner, and is a continuing process. Analysis can be based on complete transcripts, abridged transcripts, notes, or memory. The classic analysis strategy helps make analysis doable, bite-sized, and concrete. Once people have mastered the classic approach, they may want to move on to computer-based analysis. Other strategies or combinations of these elements are possible and even encouraged, providing they are systematic, verifiable, sequential, and continuing.