

Review:

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Richard A. Krueger & Mary Anne Casey (2000). Focus Groups. A Practical Guide for Applied Research (3rd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 206 pages, ISBN 0-7619-2070-6 cloth, £ 54.00, ISBN 0-7619-2071-4 paperback, £ 25.00

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Abstract: KRUEGER and CASEY have prepared a handbook for planning, preparing for, and carrying out focus group studies. A work apparently aimed at an audience of novices, *Focus Groups* lacks solid theoretical grounding, promotes substituting idiosyncratic phrasing for technical terms more commonly used in the field, and overlooks or minimizes focus group advantages for evoking structured surprise and revealing target-audiences' linguistic constructions.

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1. Introduction

The term "focus group" is well known today, not just among research professionals but among the public. Such broad (yet shallow) familiarity introduces a danger when one writes about the focus group as a technique for scientific discovery. Here is why: In this postmodern age, self-help books purport to create instant expertise in many fields. Following this trend, Richard A. KRUEGER and Mary Anne CASEY's book *Focus Groups* aims to educate students and managers how to plan, conduct, analyze, and report research projects using the focus group technique. [1]

After a brief overview chapter, their book progresses in the same logical sequence as a focus group study—chapter 2 on planning, chapter 3 on developing a "questioning route" (not the usual "discussion guide"), chapter 4 on recruiting participants, chapter 5 on moderator skills, chapter 6 on analysis, and chapter 7 on reporting results. These are followed by four more chapters dealing with fine tuning the reader's familiarity with focus groups. The book appears to be styled as a friendly volume, with extra-wide pages to facilitate note-taking, generous helpings of cartoon illustrations, and a spiral binding allowing it to remain open on the reader's desk. Occasionally, various tips are presented in one-third to one-half page boxes. The authors complete the tour in just over 200 pages, followed by two pages of references. [2]

The book provides numerous pointers on focus group pragmatics, but it disappoints in its minimal treatment of focus group methodology (as contrasted with "methods") and its overdone attempts to be accessible and cute to the focus group novice. It probably should have been titled, *Focus Groups Lite*, Third Edition. [3]

2. Shortcomings

For one thing, KRUEGER and CASEY tread too "litlely" on the variety of theoretical foundations for focus group effectiveness. They could have cited or quoted from George SIMMEL (on why people would confide in a moderator they have never met before; see his classic essay "The Stranger" in WOLFF 1950, pp.402-408) or from Erving GOFFMAN (1959) on impression management by moderator and participants, including front-stage and back-stage variations. Largely unanswered are questions like, "Why should focus groups work at all?" "Why would people divulge private thoughts and feelings to perfect strangers?" "What happens when revelation is leveraged by cash payments, turning us into 'paid informants'?" [4]

Extended consideration of underlying philosophy of science questions appears in Chapter 11—entitled, "Answering Questions about the Quality of Focus Group Research." Placement of such issues at the end of a work suggests a context of business or public-sector writing, where actionable recommendations and "top line" results are all that most readers want to learn. In academic writing, methodological discussions typically make an earlier entrance, to convince a skeptical audience that the report is worthy of their time and attention. By selecting the last chapter for their essentially correct, though "lite" treatment of such matters, KRUEGER and CASEY confirm a greater concern for convincing students and non-researcher managers to use focus groups. This is achieved at a cost of avoiding significant issues of whether or not qualitative research techniques such as the focus group are genuine science. [5]

Two other shortcomings need to be mentioned. KRUEGER and CASEY give insufficient attention to the focus group purposes of uncovering feelings and unique linguistic constructions. They are too caught up with reaching "saturation" of "opinions." Focus groups can excel at revealing emotional orientations as well as cognitive viewpoints. They also allow an investigator to learn novel language indigenous to a target audience. Again, deeper coverage of theory could have provided a foundation for the primacy of "learning the native language" in qualitative behavioral research, especially in the tradition of anthropological fieldwork. [6]

An innovation for the third edition comes off badly. Possibly to hold the interest of today's Sesame Street-bred, Internet-fed, and thirty-second-commercial-led generation of students and managers, KRUEGER and CASEY use graphic elements to illustrate their major points. Unfortunately, these come off lame at best and patronizing at worst. The reader gradually finds these cartoon elements

unworthy of attention and downright irritating at times. One is tempted to shout, "Get these cartoons out of the margins of my book!" [7]

3. Contributions

KRUEGER and CASEY's book has two commendable features, the first of which is chapter 8 on "Styles of Focus Group Research". They review similarities and differences among focus group studies in various environments—marketing research, academic research, non-profit agency evaluations, and "participative" (or public-sector) applications. This chapter alone is worth assigning to students, reprinting in research methodology collections, or both. Becoming familiar with both the central themes and organizational variations of focus group work broadens employment horizons for both students and more seasoned researchers. [8]

A second important contribution is KRUEGER and CASEY's list of occasions when to use focus group research, which can be found on page 24. One problem faced by both internal research staffs and external consultants is the problem of clients' prematurely closing on the focus group technique, to the exclusion of in-depth personal interviews or sample surveys. KRUEGER and CASEY's list should be a valuable tool in the research negotiation process. Research professionals need to know when to advocate focus groups and when to protect them from misapplication. This checklist will help a lot. [9]

Offering a number of useful insights and tools for conducting focus group studies, KRUEGER and CASEY's book may find its niche in undergraduate research methods or marketing research courses, or as entries in edited collections. [10]

References

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