

THE MOTIVATIONAL BASIS OF ATTENDANCE AT FOCUS GROUPS AND ITS EFFECT ON PARTICIPANT ATTITUDES

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The problem of nonresponse is not one which is traditionally associated with conducting focus group research. First, qualitative researchers who use this technique, unlike their quantitative counterparts, are not concerned with drawing precise probability samples of their target populations to recruit focus group participants. Second, the problem of securing the cooperation of participants has been largely obviated through the payment of a monetary incentive.

The effect of awarding a monetary incentive to recruit focus group attendees has been clearly demonstrated. While the response rates in quantitative surveys have been undergoing a decline, both imperilling the "representativeness" of the samples selected and adding to administrative costs, the granting of an "honorarium" to focus group recruits has insured an ever-abundant supply of potential recruits.

Yet, as conventional wisdom holds, the solution of one problem often creates another in its stead and one which may be equally, if not more, troublesome. Individuals who attend focus groups solely for pecuniary gain may not be as psychologically committed to the research as those who attend for other reasons. While these recruits fill the formal requirements for attendance (i.e., conform to a designated consumer/demographic profile), they may be only minimally engaged in the research process. They may be less attentive to the comments of other participants and less willing to both think about the topic under discussion and articulate their own views.

The problem of "psychological nonresponse" is one which can have an important bearing on the conduct of focus group research. The presence of psychologically uncommitted respondents in a focus group may have several deleterious effects. First, and most obvious, these individuals may be reluctant to make the necessary efforts required to be full participants in the discussion and thus their contributions may be found wanting. Second, their presence could be dispiriting with regard to the other participants and have a dampening effect on the group discussion. Since a typical focus group comprises only 6-10 respondents,

the presence of even one or two passive participants could have a profound impact on the dynamics of a group.

This study has three principal objectives: (1) to examine the reasons why people attend focus, (2) to determine the effect of motivation for attendance on attitudes towards participation, and (3) to identify the differentiating characteristics of participants with different motivations for attendance.

Method

To meet these objectives, a telephone survey was conducted with 622 individuals who had recently participated in a focus group. The individuals who were interviewed were randomly selected from 278 different focus groups.

The names and telephone numbers of individuals making up the sample frame were furnished to the authors by four field services, each one located in a different census region of the country (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West). The sample frame consisted of the names of participants in all focus groups, with two types of exceptions, held within a prescribed period of time within each region. The two types of exceptions were individuals in groups consisting wholly of "experts" (e.g., physicians, lawyers, etc.) or children. The reason for including all groups in the sample frame, with the aforementioned exceptions, was to reduce the bias which might be introduced through the pre-selection of groups.

All told, 1113 different telephone numbers were called which produced 622 completed interviews (55.9%). The number of households which refused to participate in the survey totalled 205 (18.4%).

The calling period extended from April 22 to July 29, 1992, during which time the regional field services periodically forwarded to the authors the names comprising the sample frame. Slightly over 50% of the respondents were interviewed within the first three weeks after attending a session and nearly 80% were interviewed within the first four weeks. Recalling the focus group experience was not a problem as virtually

all the respondents were able to provide detailed responses to several open-ended questions contained in the survey.

Motivations For Attendance

Several questions were included in the survey instrument to understand the motivational basis for attendance at groups. First, respondents were asked open-endedly to state the main reason why they decided to participate in the (last) focus group they attended. If they provided a mechanical response such as "I qualified" or "I had the time," they were asked to give the main reason for their attendance in addition to such factors. Though the question stipulated the "main reason," approximately one-fifth of the participants provided two responses and a minuscule fraction furnished three responses.

Table 1 displays the frequency distribution of reasons offered by participants aggregated across the three responses. The primacy of money as a motivating factor is evident from the data exhibited in this table. Fully 59% of the participants cited the honorarium as the "main reason." The next most frequently cited reason was the topic of discussion which was mentioned by 23.6% of the participants. In third place was the "interesting nature of focus groups" which was mentioned by 15.5% of the respondents. None of the other reasons given were cited by more than 10% of the participants.

Respondents were also read a list of 4 possible reasons why people might attend a focus group. The list included the following items: 1) "the particular topic of the focus group," 2) "focus groups are enjoyable," 3) the payment a person receives to participate in a focus group," and 4) "an opportunity to have my opinions heard by companies which offer particular products or services." As the list was read, respondents were asked to indicate how important each reason was to them personally as a motivation for attendance. To reduce the bias which might result from the order in which the items were presented to the respondents, the starting point of the list was rotated sequentially.

Further confirmation of the importance of money as a motivating factor is found in the responses to this list of questions (see Table 2). Viewed in terms of the proportion of respondents who cited a given factor as being "very important," the compensation a person receives for attending a group ranked as the number one reason (65.4%). Not far behind in second place

was the opportunity to participate in research (60.9%), followed by the topic of the discussion (52.6%) and the enjoyment derived from participating in a group (40.7%).

Finally, respondents were asked to identify the most important reason for attending a group of the four factors discussed above. Not surprisingly, the highest proportion of respondents (47.2%) cited money as the most important factor (see Table 3). Ranked second was the opportunity to participate in research which was cited by almost a third of the respondents (31.5%) as being the most salient factor. Trailing far behind were both the topic of the discussion and the enjoyment associated with focus groups which were mentioned as the most important reason by only 12.5% and 8.7% of the respondents respectively.

All told, these data provide compelling evidence of the importance of money as a motivation for attendance at focus groups. For a sizable number of respondents money is clearly the main reason for going to a group. Yet this finding should not obscure an equally valid finding: non-monetary factors also serve as important stimuli for attendance. In particular, the opportunity to participate in research is an important inducement.

The Effect of Motivation on Attitudes Regarding Participation

To examine the influence which motivation might exert on attitudes toward the focus group experience, respondents were first subdivided into three groups based on their responses to the open-ended question regarding motivation. The first group comprised those who mentioned only money as the main reason for attendance (43.9%). The second group comprised those who mentioned money but also some other factor(s) (15.2%). Finally, the third group consisted of those who did not mention money (40.9%). For ease of presentation, the names "the extrinsics," the "mixed-motives," and the "intrinsic" shall be assigned to these three groups respectively. An analysis was then undertaken to determine if these three groups differed in their opinions regarding their orientation towards the focus group experience.

Several different questions were inserted in the survey instrument to measure attitudes towards the focus group experience. These covered the following dimensions: 1) interest in attending the group, 2) interest in the topic of discussion, 3) attitudes toward the workload, 4) attitudes toward the length of the

group, 5) receptivity toward listening to other member's comments, and 6) overall level of enjoyment of the group experience.

On each of these items significant differences in opinion emerge among the three groups based on their reason for attendance. As the role of money in the decision to attend diminishes in importance, the attitudes of the respondents toward the experience become progressively more positive. Only 39.3% of the "extrinsics," for example, say they looked forward "very much" to attending the group compared to 51.1% of the "mixed-motives" and 63.1% of the "intrinsic." The same basic pattern holds for the degree of interest in the subject matter of the focus group. The proportion who say they were "very interested" in the subject matter increases from 46.7% to 64.9% to 73.1% among the three groups respectively. Dovetailing these results is the finding that the "extrinsics," more than the members of the other two groups, say that the number of tasks imposed on participants was too burdensome and that the focus group was too long. The figures show that 63.5% of the "extrinsics," compared to 71.3% of the "mixed-motives" and 74.3% of the "intrinsic," disagree strongly that participants were asked to perform too many tasks (see Table 4). In parallel fashion, the proportion of the three groups who disagree strongly that the session was too lengthy rises from 43.8% to 52.1% to 56.7% respectively.

What is particularly intriguing here is that motivation for attendance also appears to affect receptivity toward listening to other member's comments. When asked about the extent to which the comments of the other participants stimulated their thinking about the subject matter, only 26.2% of the "extrinsics" reply "alot," compared to corresponding figures of 33% for the "mixed-motives" and 37.5% for the "intrinsic" (see Table 5).

Not surprisingly, there is also a relationship between motivation for attendance and overall level of affectivity regarding the group experience. As money becomes less of a determinant in the decision to attend, the number of respondents who say they enjoyed being in the group "very much" goes from 61.0% to 69.1% to 86.6%.

The aforementioned findings lend unambiguous support for the notion that motivation for attendance has an important bearing on attitudes toward the focus group experience. The reasons people attend a group appear to suffuse many of their attitudes regarding the experience ranging from their interest in the subject

matter to their open-mindedness towards listening to other member's comments to the overall level of enjoyment they derive by being a participant.

Distinguishing Characteristics of Participants With Different Motivations for Attendance

The foregoing analysis has produced strong evidence of a linkage between the reasons people go to a focus group and their level of commitment to the research process. A question which arises from this finding is whether a distinctive profile of participants exists based on their motivation for attendance.

To answer this question, an analysis was conducted to identify the differentiating background characteristics of the three groups of respondents discussed in the preceding section (the "extrinsics," the "mixed-motives," and the "intrinsic"). The set of background characteristics used in this analysis included the following: sex, age, marital status, level of education, employment status, yearly household income, and total number of focus groups attended.

The most important characteristic which distinguishes the three groups of respondents is their age. As Table 6 shows, there is a monotonic decline in the proportion of respondents who attended the group just for the money (the "extrinsics") as age increases. The proportion drops from 55.9% among the 18-29 year olds to a mere 23.9% among those 50 years of age or older. Oppositely, the proportion who did not mention money as a motivating factor (the "intrinsic") rises sharply from 30.9% among the 18-29 year-old age category to 64.8% among the 50 year-and-older age category. What is important to note is that the relationship between age and motivation persists even when holding constant the sex, education, and annual household income of the respondents. It appears that younger respondents (those under 40 years of age) have a more instrumental orientation toward their role as participants than older respondents whether they be male or female, have differing levels of education (less than a 4 year college degree or a greater amount of schooling), or have differing annual household incomes (below \$40,000, between \$40,000 to \$60,000, or more than \$60,000). While the three groups classified on the basis of their motivation for attendance did not divide along gender lines, a noticeable difference did emerge when women were decomposed into two categories: full-time working women versus part-time working women or homemakers. A substantially larger proportion of full-time working women did not mention money as a

motivation for attendance than either their female counterparts who were working part-time or were homemakers or full-time working men (see Table 7).

Importantly, the relationship between work status and motivation for attendance among females holds even when controlling for age, education, and income. It appears, therefore, that the combination of being both female and working full-time exerts an influence on motivation.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that no discernible relationship exists between motivation for attendance and total number of focus groups which a respondent has attended (see Table 8). Despite the oft-mentioned claims in the literature regarding the negative consequences of having "repeaters" in a group, veteran participants (those who have attended 10 or more groups) are not any more likely to cite money as a motivation for attendance than individuals with less focus group experience.

Implications

It is clear from the findings presented above that for many people money figures prominently in their decision to attend a focus group. That money serves as an important stimulus for attendance is not surprising.

People should be compensated for their time spent as participants as well as for ancillary costs such as transportation, baby-sitting, etc. Thus, it is important for qualitative researchers to continually assess both the monetary needs and expectations of potential recruits.

While money plays a key role in the decision to attend a group for many people, the findings in this study point to a critical distinction which exists between those individuals who attend a group just for the money and those who attend for other reasons as well. On a number of different dimensions, individuals who are motivated to attend exclusively for the money appear to be less psychologically invested in the research process as a whole than those who are drawn to the group for additional reasons. As the research in this study has revealed, those who accentuate the importance of money are less positively disposed toward attending the group, less interested in the subject matter under discussion, less attuned to the comments of their fellow participants, and more likely to view the group experience as being too burdensome or lengthy than those individuals who are motivated more by non-extrinsic factors.

The implication of this last set of findings is clear. Screening of potential recruits to attend a focus group should not be based solely upon meeting demographic or consumer behavior criteria. Consideration should also be given to whether potential recruits are interested in attending a particular group just for monetary purposes or whether their interest extends beyond pecuniary gain. If potential recruits are not interested in the particular topic of discussion or, on a more general plane, are not likely to invest themselves in the research, they should be excluded from participation.

Finally, it is instructive to note that members of certain demographic groups seem to be more committed to the research process than others. One group which fits this mold are participants 40 years of age or older. It appears that these older participants place greater emphasis on the intangible benefits associated with going to a group such as the opportunity to share opinions.

Women who are employed full-time also tend to be more invested in the research process. One possible reason for this finding is that full-time working women may be more selective in deciding which group to attend. Lending support to this explanation is that full-time working women attach greater importance to the particular topic of the group as a reason for attendance than other women. If this explanation is correct, it would affirm the importance of recruiting participants who are psychologically as well as monetarily motivated to attend a group.

TABLE 1

<u>MAIN REASON GIVEN BY PARTICIPANTS FOR DECIDING TO ATTEND THE LAST FOCUS GROUP</u>	
<u>(NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS = 619)</u>	
<u>MAIN REASON</u>	<u>FREQUENCY*</u> (%)
1. The payment	59.1
2. Interest in/familiarity with the subject matter of the focus group	23.6
3. Focus groups are interesting	15.5
4. Curiosity	9.9
5. Other	11.6

*Frequencies add up to more than 100% because of multiple responses.

TABLE 2

IMPORTANCE OF FOUR POSSIBLE REASONS FOR ATTENDING A FOCUS GROUP

<u>REASON</u>	<u>IMPORTANCE</u>				<u>TOTAL</u>	
	<u>VERY IMPORTANT (%)</u>	<u>SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT (%)</u>	<u>ONLY A LITTLE IMPORTANT (%)</u>	<u>NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT (%)</u>	<u>(%)</u>	<u>(n)</u>
1. The payment a person receives	65.4	28.8	4.5	1.3	100	(622)
2. An opportunity to have my opinions heard by companies which offer particular products or services	60.9	30.3	6.6	2.3	100	(622)
3. The particular topic of the focus group is an interesting one	52.6	37.2	7.4	2.8	100	(618)
4. Focus groups are enjoyable	40.7	46.8	8.8	3.7	100	(622)

TABLE 3

THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR ATTENDING A FOCUS GROUP OF FOUR POSSIBLE REASONS.

<u>REASON</u>	<u>FREQUENCY (%)</u>
1. The payment a person receives	47.2
2. An opportunity to have my opinions heard by companies which offer particular products or services	31.5
3. The particular topic of the focus group is an interesting one	12.5
4. Focus groups are enjoyable	8.7
Total (%)	100
(n)	(606)

TABLE 4

DEGREE OF AGREEMENT WITH THE STATEMENT: "THE GROUP WAS ASKED TO PERFORM TOO MANY TASKS" BY MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE

<u>DEGREE OF AGREEMENT</u>	<u>MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE</u>		
	<u>MONETARY REASON ONLY (%)</u>	<u>MONETARY AND NON-MONETARY REASONS (%)</u>	<u>NON-MONETARY REASON(S) ONLY (%)</u>
Agree strongly/agree somewhat/disagree somewhat	36.5	28.7	25.7
Disagree strongly	63.5	71.3	74.3
Total (%)	100	100	100
(n)	(271)	(94)	(253)

Gamma = .20, p < .01

TABLE 5

EXTENT TO WHICH OTHER MEMBERS' COMMENTS STIMULATED
THINKING OF PARTICIPANT BY MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE

<u>EXTENT OF STIMULATION</u>	<u>MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE</u>		
	<u>MONETARY REASON ONLY</u>	<u>MONETARY AND NON- MONETARY REASONS</u>	<u>NON-MONETARY REASON(S) ONLY</u>
A great deal	26.2	33.0	37.5
Somewhat/only a little/not at all	73.8	67.0	62.5
Total (%)	100	100	100
(n)	(271)	(94)	(253)

Gamma = -.20, p < .01

TABLE 6

MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE BY AGE

<u>MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE</u>	<u>AGE</u>			
	<u>18-29</u>	<u>39-39</u>	<u>40-49</u>	<u>50 plus</u>
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Monetary reason only	55.9	50.8	37.1	23.9
Monetary and non-monetary reasons	13.2	16.2	17.5	11.4
Non-monetary reason only	30.9	33.0	45.4	64.8
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
(n)	(152)	(185)	(194)	(88)

Gamma = .30, p < .001

TABLE 7

MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE BY GENDER AND WORK STATUS COMBINED

<u>MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE</u>	<u>COMBINED GENDER AND WORK STATUS</u>		
	<u>FULL-TIME WORKING FEMALES</u>	<u>PART-TIME</u>	
		<u>WORKING FEMALES/ HOMEMAKERS</u>	<u>FULL-TIME WORKING MALES</u>
		(%)	(%)
Monetary reason only	38.1	48.7	41.3
Monetary and non-monetary reasons	12.9	15.5	19.8
Non-monetary reason only	49.0	35.8	38.9
Total (%)	100	100	100
(n)	(194)	(187)	(167)

Chi-square = 9.60, p < .05

TABLE 8

MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE BY NUMBER OF PREVIOUS GROUPS ATTENDED

<u>MOTIVATION FOR ATTENDANCE</u>	<u>NUMBER OF PREVIOUS GROUPS ATTENDED</u>				
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3-4</u>	<u>5-9</u>	<u>10 or more</u>
Monetary reason only	43.6	47.1	48.5	40.5	37.0
Monetary and non-monetary reasons	11.7	14.4	17.9	11.7	24.7
Non-monetary reason only	44.7	38.5	33.6	47.7	38.3
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(188)	(104)	(134)	(111)	(81)

Gamma = .01, p > .05