WHO MAKES THE BEST FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS? --AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF OVER 1000 FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS IN MORE THAN 100 GROUPS

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Introduction

Respondent selection is a topic that rightfully receives intensive attention in quantitative research. Yet it might be argued that respondent selection issues are if anything more important in <u>qualitative</u> research: If participants are lackluster the findings from a focus group are likely to be disappointing. Focus group researchers use various screening questions to winnow out unpromising participants. One line of questioning often used is to ask potential participants about how comfortable they feel expressing opinions in a group setting. However, such procedures have rarely been subjected to empirical investigation. This research links the quality of panelists' participation as judged by moderators with panelists' background characteristics, reasons for attendance, and a number of contextual factors.

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

Upon arriving at the field service, panelists filled out a mini-questionnaire providing information about their background and reasons for attendance. These data were not made available to the moderator. At the conclusion of the focus group session the moderator evaluated each participant on a 5-point scale. The mini-questionnaires and the moderator evaluations were then forwarded to the researchers.

The cooperation of one research company was secured, and 3 moderators took part in the study. Field services received a small financial incentive (25$ per group) for their cooperation.

Data were collected from a total of 107 groups representing 21 studies (research topics). Over 1000 respondents, were part of the study, with the data collected over a 13-month period

Focus group participants filled out a one-page short questionnaire in the waiting room of the field service, supervised by field service personnel. The fields then mailed these questionnaires back to the investigators.

Moderators made a rating of each participant's overall contribution to the outcome of the group in an "A" "B" "C" "D" "F" format immediately after the close of the group. The moderators did not see the questionnaire results at any time.

Outcome, Predictor, and Contextual Variables

Outcome Variable

Moderator Evaluations of Respondent Contribution to Focus Group Research Outcome: "A" "B" "C" "D" "F."

Predictor Variables

Motivation: "People have different reasons for attending focus groups. Below are listed 4 possible reasons why a person might attend a focus group. Please indicate how important each of these reasons was to you personally in deciding to attend today"
- "The payment a participant receives"
- "The topic (e.g. the product/service) was of interest to me"
- "The opportunity to go out and meet other people"
- "The opportunity to offer opinions in a research study" (items rotated)

<u>response categories and coding</u>: 4 "very important" 3 "somewhat important" 2 "only a little important" 1 "not at all important."

Most Important Motivation: "What was the most important reason why you decided to attend today's focus group (check only one)?

<u>response categories</u>: (as per previous question) "payment," "topic," "meet people," "opinions."

Anticipation: "How much would you say you were you looking forward to today's focus group?

<u>response categories</u>: 4 "very much," 3 "moderately," 2 "somewhat," 1 "only a little."

Political and Civic Participation: "How often would you say you vote in state and local elections?"

<u>response categories</u>: always, almost always, occasionally, rarely, never.

Contextual Variables:
respondent demographics, focus group characteristics (e.g. topic, day of week, etc.).

RESULTS

Distribution of Outcome Variable

Moderator evaluations of the quality of respondent participation, "grade" were high: 46 percent of all "grades" were "A" and nearly 75 percent of all "grades" were either "A" or "B". However, these total figures mask moderator differences: Moderator 3 assigned 68 per cent of all focus group participants an "A", as opposed to the corresponding 39% and 37% for moderators 1 and 2 (see Table 1 Below).

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Table 1: Distribution of Grades by Moderator

               |  Respondent "Grade" (moderator evaluation)
               |
               |    F       D       C       B       A |   Total
---------------+-------------------------------------------+--
moderator 1 |    10      34      93     127     171 |     435
               |  2.30    7.82   21.38   29.20   39.31 |  100.00
---------------+-------------------------------------------+--
moderator 2 |     1       4      30      33      40 |     108
               |  0.93    3.70   27.78   30.56   37.04 |  100.00
---------------+-------------------------------------------+--
moderator 3 |     2       4      18      38     132 |     194
               |  1.03    2.06    9.28   19.59   68.04 |  100.00
---------------+-------------------------------------------+----
    Total   |    13      42     141     198     343 |     737
               |  1.76    5.70   19.13   26.87   46.54 |  100.00
```

Distribution of "Motivation" variable

Motivations: "The opportunity to offer an opinion" was ranked highest as a reason for attending the focus group; "meeting people" was ranked less important than the other reasons. Table 2 below presents summary information about the motivational questions asked.

Table 2: Means, Medians, Percent answering "very important" and N's for Respondent rating of "Reason for Attending Today's Focus Group"

	Opinion	Topic	Payment	Meet People
mean	3.47	3.36	3.27	2.37
(std. deviation)	0.64	0.67	0.69	0.96
median	4	3	3	3
% answering "very important"	54.6%	45.3%	39.4%	12%
	N=1027	N=1029	N=1027	N=852
(coding: 4=very impt 1=not at all impt.)				

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The Question of the "Professional Respondent"

Are there large numbers of repeat focus group participants who are mainly interested in the payment typically offered as an incentive and who contribute little to the outcome of the group? Our results suggest that the "professional respondent" is not an important problem for the focus group industry. Furthermore, while previous focus group experience was found to be related to motivation for attending, it was not related to respondent "grade."

A large proportion of respondents --44%-- had attended at most only one prior focus group session (Table 3).

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Table 3: Prior (last 5 years)
     Focus Group Experience

No.of grps|   Freq.      Percent
----------+---------------------
   0 grps |    205        24.03
   1 grp  |    173        20.28
 2-3 grps |    277        32.47
 4-5 grps |    140        16.41
 6-7 grps |     41         4.81
 8 & >    |     17         1.99
----------+---------------------
   Total  |    853       100.00
```

Previous focus group experience was related to "most important reason for attending" the focus group session (Table 4). Those respondents with little to no experience (0 or 1 previous group) were more likely to say "Opinion" was the most important reason for their attendance. Among those who had attended more than 1 group per year over the past 5 years "Payment " was the most important reason.

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Table 4: Previous Experience and "Most
Important Reason for Attending Today's
           Focus Group"
Previous |  Most Important Reason
Focus Grp|
Exper.   | Opinion Payment  Topic
---------+---------------------------
 0 - 1   |   44.07   29.66   26.27 100
 2 - 5   |   36.11   35.10   28.79 100
 6 or >  |   37.04   46.30   16.67 100
         |
 Tot.    |   39.68   33.46   26.87 100
---------+---------------------------
```
Key: row percentages, N=804
Cell percentages are based on
estimation for clustered data; data
analyzed as clustered by group, and
stratified by study.

Pearson chi2, N=804:
Uncorrected chi2 (4) =10.2711
Design-based F (3.82,271.57)=2.9248
P= 0.023

However, amount of previous focus group experience was not related to the "How much were you looking forward to today's group?" question -- a measure of positive anticipation (chi sq. significance .85). More significantly, previous focus group experience was not related to respondent "Grade" (chi sq. sig. 0.75; bivariate tables not shown).

Bivariate relationships of motivation and voting with focus group participant "grade"

We expected focus group participant "grade" would be related to three predictor constructs, and accordingly included relevant items on the questionnaire:

We expected that respondents who were motivated primarily by the material incentive (payment) would contribute less to the focus group than respondents who were motivated more by "opinion" or "topic."

We also expected that voting in state and local elections relates to a larger dimension of participation (i.e. civic engagement), and hence would be related to the quality of focus group participation.

Finally, we expected that education, known to be associated with more involvement with voluntary organizations, as well as with verbal behavior and fluency, would be associated with quality of focus group participation.

Table 5 presents a summary variable comparing participant rating of "Opinion" (i.e. reason for attending today's focus group) compared to "Payment," crosstabulated with participant "Grade." Due to the low relative number of "C", "D", and "F" grades, these were collapsed into a single category.

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Table 5: Motivation ("intrinsic" vs.
         "extrinsic) and "Grade"

Motivation |        "Grade"
           | C/D/F    B      A
---------- +-----------------------
 Opin<Paym | 33.80  23.24  42.96  100
 Opin=Paym | 28.33  24.67  47.00  100
 Opin>Paym | 20.83  30.56  48.61  100
           |
 Tot.      | 26.44  26.71  46.85  100
---------- +-----------------------
Key: row percentages, N=730; data
clustered

Pearson chi2, N=730
Uncorrected chi2(4) = 10.0976
Design-based F(3.85,319.80) =2.4271
P= 0.050
```

Respondents rating Opinion lower than Payment were more likely to receive a "grade" of C/D/F. Respondents rating Opinion higher than Payment were more likely to receive a "grade" of "A."

Table 6 presents participant voting in state and local elections, and education related to "grade."

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Table 6: Frequency of Voting in State
and Local Elections and "Grade"

            |        "Grade"
 Voting     | C/D/F    B      A    Total
----------- +------------------------
occas.& <   | 38.36  23.97  37.67  100
almst alwys | 25.81  30.65  43.55  100
always      | 21.73  25.30  52.98  100
            |
    Total   | 26.44  26.85  46.71  100
----------- +------------------------
  Key:  row percentages

Pearson chi2, N=730
Uncorrected  chi2(4)  = 18.6936
Design-based  F(3.90,323.49) = 5.0186
P= 0.001  N=730
```

Participants who said they "always" vote in state and local elections were more likely to earn an "A" from the moderator on the quality of their participation than those who voted less frequently. Participants who said they voted "occasionally" "rarely" or "never" were more likely to earn a C/D/F from the moderator on the quality of their participation than those who voted more frequently.

Respondent education was also related to "grade" (not shown; chi sq. significance .0033).

Multivariate Modeling

We use ordinal logit modeling as a way of considering the effects of variables simultaneously and to statistically control for background variables as well. Table 7 (below) shows the results of multivariate modeling with the predictor variables we have presented above. Table 7 presents first model A with grade related to motivation, voting, and respondent education. We then remove moderator 3's cases (model B). Finally, we then introduce sex and work status (full time, part-time) as control variables.

Ordinal Logit Modeling confirms the bivariate findings presented above, with civic participation as measured by voting in state and local elections the strongest predictor.

```
Table 7: Ordinal Logit of Grade on
Motivation, Voting, and Education.
Model A Presents data from all
Moderators, Model B removes
Moderator3 observations (t statistics
in parentheses; probability >|t|:
***<.000  **<.01  *<.05)


        Model :      A           B
        # obs :      728         536
        Dep.var.:    Grade       Grade
        ---------------------------------
        Voting       0.324       0.443
                     (3.30**)    3.93***)

        Intrinsic    0.188       0.377
        Motivation   (1.89)      (3.43**)

        Educ.Level   0.206       0.346
                     (2.49*)     (3.89***)
        ---------------------------------
Prob > F             0.0001      0.0000

Data meet "proportional odds"
assumption.
Coding: Voting: 1 "occasionally or
less"  2 "almost always" 3 "always;"
Intrinsic Motivation:
"opinion<payment" 1 "opinion=payment"
2 "opinion>payment" 3;
Education 1 "HS," 2 "some college," 3
"college degree," 4 "postgraduate"
```

Voting in state and local elections, and respondent education are significant in model A; however the "Intrinsic" motivation variable is (narrowly) not significant.

Removing moderator 3's observations has the effect of increasing the variability in the "grade" variable, with the result that all predictors are now strongly significant

Table 8 presents the data from Table 7 in a form more convenient for interpretation.

```
Table 8:Ordinal Logit, Exponentiated
Coefficients
        ----------------------------------
        Model :      A           B
        # obs :      728         536
        Depvar:      Grade       Grade
        ----------------------------------

        Voting       1.38        1.56
                     (3.30**)    (3.93***)

        Intrinsic    1.21        1.46
        Motivation   (1.89)      (3.43**)


        Educ.Level   1.23        1.41
                     (2.49*)     (3.89***)
```

The odds of an "A" grade versus the combined outcomes of B, and C/D/F are 1.38 times greater (or, 38% greater) for a change in voting from "occasionally or less" to "almost always", or from "almost always to "always" (Model A).

The odds of an "A" and "B" grade versus a grade of C/D/F are 1.21 times greater (21% greater) for respondents who ranked "opinion" more important than "payment" (Model A).

Elaborating the Model: Adding Age, Sex, and Work Status.

We introduced age, sex, and work status as controls because of the possibility that they might interact with the basic model. Age and work status had no direct effect, but sex was significant. However, upon further analysis we found that sex and work status interacted statistically with variables in our model.

For women who worked part-time, or who described themselves as homemakers (N=281), the model fits the data well: voting, intrinsic motivation, and education are all strong and significant predictors of "grade," and the measure of model fit is strongly significant. For women who work full time (N=146), only voting remains a significant predictor of "grade" for focus group participation. For men who worked full time (N=99; the sample included only a handful of non-full time working men) voting and education remain as significant predictors of "grade" for focus group participation.

In conclusion, these results indicate that voting, intrinsic motivation, and education influence focus group participation in the context of sex and work status.

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