Editor’s Note:
Focus groups are routinely used in social norms campaigns to help in the development of surveys, evaluate media messages, and gain information on how campaigns are perceived. This working paper provides important information on how to conduct focus groups and ensure that the information gained from them is useful and accurate. It is an important contribution to the social norms literature that will hopefully help increase the methodological rigor and effectiveness of social norms campaigns.

The purpose of this article is to identify common misperceptions surrounding focus group research projects. We offer these “top ten misperceptions” in order to address the threats to the quality of focus group research. As researchers who have used and benefited from conducting focus groups, we hope that one of the key contributions that we can make is to use our experiences to point to the most crucial areas of misunderstanding about the best and highest use of focus groups.

Too often, decision making about when and why to use focus groups is governed by misperceptions. Focus group research has been both praised and criticized for the wrong reasons. As researchers who have developed many qualitative research designs and conducted many focus groups, we are not dispassionate about this subject. We agree with researchers Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) when they declared their Handbook of Qualitative Research that “a quiet methodological revolution” in qualitative inquiry has been occurring over the last several decades. Not long ago, nothing but strictly quantitative research methods were considered acceptable “science,” and focus groups, now so widely used, were unheard of less than 15 years ago. It is clear that we are making slow, incremental progress in recognizing the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative research within the research community, but these fragile steps forward are at risk if not accompanied by a commitment to qualitative methodological standards. In short, we are concerned that the rapidly growing popularity of focus groups may well lead to a fair amount of substandard work. The philosopher of science, Abraham Kaplan (1952), articulated our concern in what he called the law of the instrument, which he described metaphorically by saying when you give a small child a hammer, it soon discovers that everything needs hammering. To avoid that pitfall, some real care needs to be applied in the decision to select and implement focus groups.

Researchers engaged in projects based on the social norms approach have identified the special advantages in using focus groups. Focus group participants help shape and improve the surveys upon which campus and community normative approaches are based by providing feedback on the formulation of whole question categories to fine-tuning wording on particular questions. Focus groups have enriched many campus social norms marketing projects by pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses of particular photo collages or normative campaign messages. Targeted focus groups have aided us in understanding how our social norms marketing campaigns may affect particular groups of students on campus. Finally, focus groups provide a setting in which we can test the holistic effect of how students understand and experience the overall impact of a social norms campaign.

Common Misperceptions of Focus Groups

The misperceptions and misunderstandings of focus group research that we encounter most frequently are summarized below, along with examples of each.
1. Focus groups are easy.

Focus groups are one of many qualitative research methodologies that require careful planning, elaborate logistical preparation, thoughtful execution, and detailed analysis. The execution of a focus group research project may appear easy—a group of people sitting in a circle talking—but often belies the complicated work that is necessary before and after that seemingly effortless group discussion. It may be tempting to think of the focus group researcher as taking an easier path than her quantitative counterpart, but the reality is that the focus group researcher is merely choosing “another” path.

Let’s start with a definition: Focus groups are a qualitative research method in which a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristic is brought together by a trained facilitator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific research interest. For example, at Western Washington University (WWU), we have conducted focus groups at all stages of developing and implementing our social norms approach to reducing heavy, frequent drinking. Focus groups composed of randomly selected students have provided feedback on the language and meaning of newly developed survey questions and on the believability of main messages in our ad campaigns. At Rutgers University (RU), we have also used focus groups in all phases of our campaigns. In fact, our initial understanding of the misperception of heavy drinking as the norm on campus grew out of a series of 16 focus groups that were conducted in the late 1980s to determine the role of alcohol in Rutgers students’ lives.

The quality and integrity of a focus group project depends on careful attention to the following steps:

- Define the purpose of the project or research.
- Develop an interview protocol or questioning guide that addresses the research question.
- Train the focus group facilitator and scribes.
- Recruit and select participants for the research.
- Plan and implement the logistics for the actual focus groups (room, equipment, food, incentives, etc.).
- Conduct the focus groups—generally not less than two groups and often not more than four.
- Analyze the focus group results.
- Report on the results.

While we will discuss many of these steps in detail as we address some of the other misperceptions about focus groups, we hope that seeing the steps required for conducting high-quality focus group research convinces you that there is nothing easy about this research method.

2. Focus groups are quick.

A general rule in focus group research is to continue conducting interviews until no new or relevant information emerges from the groups. In focus group lingo, the researcher has reached a point of “saturation” on each of the categories of investigation. Typically, the first two groups with a particular audience provide a considerable amount of new information, but by the third or fourth session little new information emerges.

Most of the focus group projects we have conducted have taken between three and four months to complete. A common timeline consists of one month to plan the focus group project: clarifying the central research question and developing interview questions that thoroughly interrogate the research question. Another month is needed to organize and conduct the focus groups themselves, recruiting the appropriate participants and arranging the logistics. Count on at least another month to conduct an analysis of the data, especially if you choose to do a complete transcript of the focus groups’ interviews. Finally, you can depend on needing at least a week or two of concentrated writing to communicate what you learn from the focus groups.

One focus group project we conducted at WWU provided a textbook example of this timeline. We were interested in working with different populations of drinkers (non-drinkers, moderate drinkers, heavy drinkers) to discern how they thought about the role of alcohol in their social lives at WWU and how they responded to our social norms campaign, which at that time was about 10 months old. We were given permission by an academic department to recruit students from four large lecture classes in which students receive credit for participating in out-of-class research projects.

During the first month of the project, we developed our research protocols, delivered recruitment talks in the classes, and asked students who volunteered for the project to fill out a brief drinking profile. Using the results of the brief drinking profile, we separated students into groups of non-drinkers, moderate drinkers, and heavy drinkers.

During the second month of the project, we conducted two focus groups with each of the three populations of student drinkers. Given the time demands on students’ lives, we needed the entire month to carry out all six focus groups. We decided to do a complete transcript-based analysis of the results (See number 9). This level of analysis required two graduate students to spend over three weeks transcribing six audiotapes. We needed another week to edit the transcripts for spelling and readability. Finally, a senior staff member and the two graduate students analyzed the transcripts for themes and patterns in the data, and developed the final report. The entire process from start to finish took four months.
Focus Group Transcript Analysis Guidelines

1. Read through the transcript. Notice that some parts of the transcript contain ideas spoken by the narrators.

2. Pay particular attention to same ideas that are brought up more than once or by more than one narrator.

3. Make brief notations of the ideas in the margins. Don’t be afraid to mark or write on the text of the transcript.

4. Make a separate list of the ideas you are starting to notice for future reference.

5. Underline or highlight sentences or phrases that build on or exemplify the idea. Your underlines or highlights will be important to the final report as you seek quotations that emphasize the ideas in the focus groups.

6. Summarize repetitive ideas by developing an overall encompassing theme. Ideas that repeat themselves become themes.

7. List the themes on a separate sheet of paper. You might also want to list the page number of the transcript where the ideas for the themes can be found.

8. At times you may come across an idea that is not repeated and therefore does not constitute a theme. However, the idea may be important because it contains atypical information that differs from the repetitive ideas in the focus group. List the page number where these unusual ideas may be found so that you can bring them into the final report if you choose to.

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3. Focus groups are cheap.

Here are some costs you can factor into your focus group research planning:

- **Incentives for participants.** At the minimum, people feel welcomed and appreciated if you provide refreshments. If you are dealing with college students, we recommend that you provide food in addition to refreshments. Some professional focus group firms actually pay participants to attend focus groups. We have also used incentives of gift certificates at the bookstore for some student focus groups. In one recent study at RU, for example, we recruited students through the campus newspaper by offering them $30 each to participate in one ninety-minute focus group. We had eight groups with ten students recruited for each group. Although we used only seven participants for each group, more showed up, we paid them and thanked them for their interest. In total, we had seventy students at thirty dollars apiece. And this was only one of the expenses for that series of focus groups, since we also paid for refreshments, moderators, and newspaper ads to recruit students, and transcriptionists to do the initial verbatim transcript.

- **Room rental.** Find a room that conveys a sense of professionalism to the participants. This could mean that you will pay a rental fee.

- **Equipment purchase or rental.** Nothing is as disheartening as a well-conducted focus group that is not recorded in a manner that can be heard or transcribed. If you plan on doing lots of focus group research, you may want to think about investing in a good audio tape recorder and microphone that is specially designed to pick up a complete group discussion. If you are conducting a one-time focus group, you may need to rent audio equipment.

- **Honorarium for facilitators and scribes.** Professional focus group facilitator fees can range from $50 to $100 or more an hour. If you choose to recruit facilitators and scribes (people who sit in the group and record details of the group process and major themes) from your faculty or staff, consider offering them an honorarium for being a part of your research team. Good focus group facilitators do not just show up and conduct a quality group. In addition to training they may need, they may also want to meet with you and your research team in order to understand the dynamics and details of the research.

- **Transportation, babysitters, etc.** Depending on the target audience you recruit, you may need to think about the costs of getting your participants to the group. For older students or students who do not live on campus, this could mean factoring in costs like transportation, babysitters, etc.

4. Any five people make a focus group.

This may seem like a no-brainer, but the people you recruit to be in your focus group should match the category of inquiry in your research. If the research question you want to answer is about the experiences of Medicaid hospital patients, then you need to recruit Medicaid hospital patients. If you want to understand the responses of heavy, frequent drinkers to your social norms marketing campaign, then it is heavy, frequent drinkers on campus who you must recruit. To recruit any group of college students into a focus group on the efficacy of a social norms campaign will not answer the research question about how heavy, frequent drinkers respond to the campaign. For example, in the focus group project conducted at WWU with three different populations of drinkers, it was critical to administer...
a brief drinking profile to all the students who volunteered from the academic class in order to assemble homogeneous groups of drinkers and/or non-drinkers. Our preliminary survey data had suggested that non-drinkers, moderate drinkers, and heavy drinkers were responding quite differently to our social norms media campaign. The research team wanted to understand the meaning behind the differences in each group’s thinking and response to the campaign. Therefore, great care was exercised in recruiting groups that matched the categories of student drinkers we were interested in.

In a similar situation at RU, we had recruited students into groups comprised by degrees of drinking. One student in the female, non-drinker group seemed at variance with everyone else in all her responses. Later in the group it came out that she was in recovery, and that the reason she did not drink was because of recovery. This made her very different from the rest of the group who did not drink simply because they did not want to. She wanted to and couldn’t. They didn’t want to and didn’t. Thus the synergy that is the hallmark of good focus groups could not be achieved with that grouping of people. We learned as a consequence to be even more specific in the questions we asked in our screening guide to recruit students.

Additionally, while five is a good minimum number to shoot for, a group of seven to eight participants seems to produce the right balance of giving everyone enough “air time” and having enough diversity of perspectives. It is crucial to keep in mind that often all the participants you have recruited will not show up for the actual focus group, so recruiting a few more than necessary is not a bad idea. Finally, if you are dealing with complex topics, ten or more participants are probably too many.

5. Focus group facilitators can play the discussion by ear.

The focus group facilitator is part of a research team. To a large extent, the quality of the results of focus group research is directly related to the skills and preparation of the facilitator. In some situations, volunteers may act as focus group facilitators but they must be carefully trained and practiced if the quality of the results matters to the researcher.

Focus group facilitators know how to use group process skills (setting ground rules, listening, responding, using open-ended questions), but they also must be skilled in areas that are often not familiar to support group or therapeutic group leaders. For example, focus group facilitators know how to advance a questioning protocol without unduly interrupting the smooth flow of conversation. The facilitator knows how to use questions that probe, test, and steer participants so that the group continues to address the main research questions. The optimal focus group facilitator is able to maintain a big picture of the research underway, and, at the same time, to remain disciplined in her attention to the details under discussion. This all amounts to a lot of mental preparation, thorough grounding in the goal of the research, and well-honed competencies in the general skills of group leadership and the specific skills of focus group moderation.

In one series of focus groups that we did at RU we wanted to understand how central alcohol was in the participants’ social lives. In designing the focus group guide (the structured protocol from which moderators ask their questions to the group) we decided that we would accomplish this by asking them about what it was like socially to be a first-year student at Rutgers without mentioning alcohol use at all unless they brought it up. The group facilitators had questions prepared to probe the topic of alcohol use if it was not mentioned. In the entire series of sixteen interviews, each group brought up the topic without it ever being questioned by the facilitator. The fact that they did bring it up, told a great deal about the role of alcohol in their lives, and actually turned out to be one of the important findings of the study. The facilitator’s trained response to the participant’s bringing up the topic was crucial to the design and flow of the project.

6. Focus group data can be used to replace survey questionnaires.

This statement makes as much sense as saying that oranges can be used to replace apples. Focus group data is different from the data produced by survey questionnaires, especially when the survey is administered to a randomized sample of a population. Survey questionnaires produce numerical data, often expressed in percentages, which describe a composite answer given by a group of people to a specific set of questions. The data produced by survey research is useful because it answers the question of “how much” or “to what extent” a particular phenomenon is occurring.

However, survey questions do not provide the researcher with the nuances of meaning behind the numbers and percentages. A survey may tell us that 20 percent of our students do not drink alcohol—itself an important point. But the survey does not yield “textured” data that reveals how these non-drinking students arrived at the decision to not consume alcohol, what supports them in their decision, and what obstacles they perceive on campus to maintaining their decision. For example, at WWU we made an assumption that non-drinkers would report instances of family alcohol abuse problems and/or religious reasons as the rationale for their decision to be abstinent. While those ideas were indeed heard in our focus groups, the more common themes reported by non-drinkers as their reasons for choosing abstinence were concerns about health and physical fitness, fear that alcohol would negatively affect grades, and a belief that alcohol
did not equal fun. Non-drinkers also told us that they experienced a great deal of peer support for their decision not to drink at WWU. This focus group data does not and should not replace the survey results that told us that 20 percent of our students did not drink. It merely provides a more in-depth perspective on one piece of quantitative data.

Focus group data can reveal the deeper meanings and shed light on the interpretation of survey questionnaire data. Focus groups are best when the question you ask is a “why” behind the behavior; a survey when what you want to know is “how much” of the behavior.

7. You can generalize what you learn from a focus group to your population.

All research is based on certain assumptions. One of the assumptions implicit in focus group research is that the sample, or the participants, may not necessarily reflect the entire population. One of the greatest advantages of focus groups is that they produce in-depth information. The facilitator probes to find out if the participants really understood the question and the participants provide details that illuminate their responses. Although the focus group produces rich, in-depth information, there is a risk in using this information to generalize to a population because focus group participants are not chosen to reflect or represent all members of a population.

If the focus group research has been carefully conducted and appropriately analyzed, then the researcher can cautiously transfer what she has learned in the focus group to other people who possess similar characteristics as the people in the focus group. This process differs from survey data that is collected from a sample of an entire population that is selected in a statistically randomized method that allows the researcher to generalize what she has learned from the survey to all persons in the population.

At RU, for example, we conduct a social norms campaign called “The Top Ten Misperceptions at Rutgers.” Our campaign makes use of statistics as part of our central message about the norms on campus. But we get those statistics from random surveys. While we know a great deal about the attitudes, feelings and beliefs of our students through our on-going data collection in focus groups, we take care not to try to generalize from those data or to use them as statistics. When we find something that we want to generalize, we include it in future survey items. We found one semester, for instance, that students in our groups told us that professors encouraged drinking by making jokes about it in class. In our next survey we asked questions about this and found that, in fact, a high percentage of students thought so, too. Thus, the groups led us to quantitative data collection but not to quantitative findings from the groups.

8. Qualitative data produced in focus groups is better than quantitative data.

All research consists of a systematic way of finding out how the world works. Quantitative and qualitative research goes about this systematic process in different ways. Quantitative research uses numerical analysis to measure “how much or how many” of a particular phenomenon is occurring among a typically large, representative sample of people. It is deductive; that is, the researcher usually has an idea or a hypothesis that she is testing to determine cause and effort. The researcher remains (allegedly) distant from and independent of her subjects and establishes the validity and reliability of her research through statistical tests on the instruments used to collect the data.

Qualitative research uses interviews, case studies, focus groups, participant observations, oral histories, etc. to describe “why or how” a particular phenomenon is occurring, usually among a relatively small, homogeneous group of people. The researcher often interacts with her subjects by listening to them and/or observing them over a period of time. The emphasis of methodological rigor is not on mathematical validity but rather on the trustworthiness and credibility of the processes the researcher uses. Thus, the trustworthiness of the research hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the work. One might say that the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research. Qualitative research is inductive in that it allows participants to respond in their own words using their own categorizations and perceived associations. Qualitative techniques usually produce a wealth of detailed information from a small number of relatively similar people that increases our understanding of the nuances of how they perceive reality.

Qualitative insights gleaned from focus groups that probe into how students think about the drinking culture on their campuses have contributed to the successful development and implementation of social norms media campaigns on many campuses. Discovering why students think a certain ad is “cheesy” or what language they use to talk about “socializing with alcohol” is not “better” than knowing how many believe our social norms ads and how many do not. These two categories of information are merely different, yet equally important to refining the implementation strategies that can make or break a social norms media campaign.

9. Focus group results can be easily compiled and reported.

As Richard Krueger (1994) comments in his book entitled *Focus Groups*, “Next to planning, analysis is the second black hole for estimating time and resources.” Compiling focus group results involves the identification of themes, patterns, similarities, and differences in the data within and across all the groups. It also involves preparing a
A Checklist for Effective Focus Groups

Be Sure You Need to Do Focus Groups
✓ Identify whether qualitative data is what you need.
✓ Do a cost-benefit analysis of focus groups.

Be Sure to Articulate the Purpose of the Interviews
✓ Spell out the purpose for the data collection.
✓ Focus on potential insight into human behavior.

Specify the Research Questions and the Issues You Want Discussed
✓ Determine the specific research questions to be addressed.
✓ Identify the issues to be discussed to get answers to those questions.

Identify Your Target Population
✓ Specify the common denominators that identify members of the target population.
✓ Select people who are a purposive sampling of that group.
✓ Make group composition homogeneous for identification on the topic.
✓ Conduct multiple group interviews with a sampling of any given segment.

Select Appropriate People to Participate in Your Groups
✓ Have clear selection criteria and adhere to them.
✓ Create groups of 7-10 people.

Design and Use a Well Constructed Focus Interview Guide
Include:
✓ an introduction (purpose, ground rules and parameters)
✓ an ice breaker or warm up set of questions
✓ a series of all relevant major/probe questions
✓ a summary or closing section

Select An Appropriate Place to Conduct the Interviews
✓ Make the room conducive to the interview.
✓ Provide food and soft drinks.
✓ Use a tape recorder.
✓ Make seating arrangements around a large table with comfortable chairs.
✓ Do not allow observers in the room.

Conduct the Focus Group Interviews by Sensitively Asking Questions and Listening to Answers
✓ Determine degree of directiveness or non-directiveness.
✓ Provide ground rules.
✓ Be aware of group processes—use them, don’t try to control them.
✓ Help quiet people talk; limit talkative people.

Analyze the Results of Your Interviews
✓ Tape record all groups.
✓ Create a verbatim and summary transcript.
✓ Systematically code and analyze.
✓ Identify themes.

Present Your Findings in Summary Reports
✓ Create a structure for the presentation of findings.
✓ Include verbatim comments from transcripts.
✓ Include research question, issues, participants, structure, findings, and conclusions.


readable written summary that uses actual quotations from the focus groups to breathe life and validity into the identified themes and patterns. Different levels of analysis require different time commitments, expertise, and rigor:

- Complete transcript-based analysis consists of combining analysis of verbatim transcription of all focus group tapes, scribe notes, and debriefing conversations. It is the most time and labor intensive. From our experiences, we have learned that one hour of focus group discussion requires two to three hours of transcription from a trained professional transcriber. A non-professional transcriber will probably need six to eight hours to transcribe one hour of taped conversation. This assumes that the transcriber will not be interrupted, that the original tape is of reasonable quality, and that the transcriber has adequate equipment and skills.

- Audit-based analysis consists of listening to the tapes and transcribing only those segments that illustrate the themes and patterns the researcher has discerned.

- Note-based analysis consists of writing a report from the notes compiled from the focus group facilitator, the scribe, and debriefing conversations.

- Memory-based analysis consists of writing a quick report immediately after a focus group based on the impressions of the facilitator and the scribe.

As you can see, each level introduces more subjectivity, and thus more error, into the analysis. We urge you to consider using complete transcript analysis wherever possible.

10. Focus groups pose no risk to participants.

Increasingly, institutional review boards (IRB) have begun to require...
and the researcher has the expectation that this research will lead to a publication or a degree, then the participants are likely to be sorely disappointed. Much criticism has been leveled at quantitative, “positivist,” empirical research because it objectifies and disembodies participants. However, the very same negative outcome is possible, if not predictable, in qualitative research when peoples’ words and ideas are used in ways they did not understand or consent to or are not used for outcomes they thought would occur.

Third, participants often confuse “telling their stories”—which are often personal and sometimes painful—with efforts designed to help them or to solve their problems. If the focus group project is truly designed to impact institutional change, that goal should be clear to participants. If the focus group research is being conducted by persons who are not in positions to impact institutional change, that fact also should be clear to participants.

Finally, both for the protection of the participants and for good research results, participants need to be anonymous to one another. Limiting ourselves to groups of participants who do not know each other can be difficult on a college campus. But if the group is to feel the comfort and safety needed to talk freely and if the research does not want the discussion to be contaminated by relationships outside the interview (e.g., roommates, friends, sisters, etc.), it is important to assemble groups who do not know one another beforehand. When groups whose members are not known to each other are impossible to put together, expanding the number of groups beyond the narrow set of concerns that may dominate a particular set of acquaintances can help. In one series of focus groups at RU, for example, groups were recruited through the campus newspaper. Since more than thirty thousand students attend Rutgers, it was not discovered until one group was well into the interview that three of the women in it were roommates in an off-campus apartment. When the results of the groups were analyzed, a careful review of the transcripts indicated that there were differences between this group’s pattern of responses and agreement than any of the other six groups of women interviewed. Consequently, this particular group’s interview was set aside. And it was also fortunate that their relationships came up during the interview, or the differences in this group might have led us to a real misinterpretation of the data.

**Concluding Thoughts**

What is not a misperception is that when used well, focus groups are a powerful tool for understanding more about how people think, why they engage in certain behaviors, and what they perceive. The insights gained from well designed and implemented focus group research provides rich data to help us understand better the complex phenomena surrounding college drinking and the role of communication and social norms in the life of college students. Good focus groups require time and effort. The results warrant the hard work because the things we learn from focus groups just cannot be found in survey data collection. Our role in conducting good focus group research is much like the moderator in a focus group: We must be flexible in facilitating a complex human process while we carefully and systematically adhere to research standards that produce results that have value.
Some Readings on Focus Groups


