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## Breaking the Rules: A Group Work Perspective on Focus Group Research

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### SUMMARY

Focus groups, originally used in fields such as marketing and consumer research, are rapidly gaining popularity as a research methodology in the social sciences. It is interesting to note that most of the scholarly work on focus groups continues to come from business rather than the social sciences. Few researchers have discussed the differing purposes and goals in social science and consumer research (Ospina, 1994; Moore, 1996). Furthermore, the literature on focus group research rarely utilizes social work knowledge of group dynamics or group facilitation skills. Rather, the literature on focus groups tends to give guidelines for leading groups, telling focus group facilitators what to do and what not to do in leading such groups. We believe that these guidelines, while generally helpful, can lead to rigidity on the part of focus group leaders. We suggest that, in social work research, focus group facilitators should use their knowledge of group dynamics and the values of individualization and empathy to modify focus group rules where appropriate.

This paper describes part of a qualitative study of client/worker relationships in residential mental health settings. During the course of this research, group work principles came into conflict, at times, with recommended guidelines for focus group leaders. The paper illustrates how insights gleaned from group work theory and practice can enable a researcher to break focus group rules responsibly, thus bringing greater depth to the data gathered and allowing the researcher to be more sensitive to the needs of focus group participants.

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## FOCUS GROUPS AS RESEARCH

As a data gathering tool, focus groups have many advantages. They can be easy to conduct (Morgan, 1988), cost efficient, and can yield quick results (Krueger, 1988). They permit a larger sample size for a qualitative study than individual interviews. Focus groups allow the researcher to probe responses for depth and detail and permit follow-up questions regarding unanticipated areas (Krueger, 1988). The interaction of focus group participants can bring in new perspectives on the questions, often generating richer data than individual interviews (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988).

Focus groups also have some disadvantages. They may be more difficult to organize and present greater challenges than individual interviews in terms of requirements for comfortable, convenient locations and mutually agreeable times (Krueger, 1988). Individual behaviour and opinions can be influenced by the group, potentially distorting the data gathered (Morgan, 1988). Shifting opinions over the course of the session can also make the data difficult to analyze (Krueger, 1988). The researcher has less control over a group interview than an individual one, so a group is more likely to wander off track (Krueger, 1988). It has been suggested that focus groups are not effective for exploring controversial topics as subjects may be reluctant to state their opinions publicly (Morgan, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993). Questions have also been raised about the effectiveness of focus groups in discussing highly complex topics (Greenbaum, 1993).

## FOCUS GROUP LEADERSHIP

There are some skills that are considered particularly important for facilitating focus groups. It is essential that the research be planned thoroughly before focus groups begin. The purpose of the study, the subjects and pre-tested questions need to be in place at the outset (Krueger, 1988). Leaders need to be able to put participants at ease and foster interaction, quickly setting the stage for the group. The focus group generally begins with a statement of purpose and introduction of members, followed by an introduction of the topic (Morgan, 1988) and background information on the research (Krueger, 1988). If new ideas are introduced related to the topic, the facilitator needs to be able to recognize, note and remember them, in order to reintroduce them later in the group (Morgan, 1988). The facilitator must be a good listener, be able to set the stage for questions, move from general to specific topics, and know how to probe for more depth and reasoning behind responses (Krueger, 1988). The facilitator needs to be able to reinforce participation and elicit new ideas, minority perspectives (Axlerod, 1979), and the thoughts of 'low-status members' (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) without reinforcing any ideas of

the participants (e.g. with head nods) (Krueger, 1988). In addition to knowledge about the topic, the facilitator must be comfortable with the group process and know how to manage the dynamics of dominant members or a hostile group (Krueger, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993). Obtaining all viewpoints is more important than reaching consensus (Axlerod, 1979).

Focus groups should emphasize the information the researcher wishes to obtain, rather than be driven by the needs and socio-emotional concerns of group members (Morgan, 1988; Toseland and Rivas, 1995). Topics which cannot be resolved within one session may need to be avoided by the worker (Shalinsky, 1981). The facilitator should be able to guide discussion on the topic and tactfully refocus when it moves off task (Axlerod, 1970).

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) recommend a more flexible approach to focus group leadership than many other authors. They suggest that participants do not need to be strangers to one another and that different kinds of research questions require different approaches on the part of the leader. For example, a group whose purpose is to generate new ideas and creative solutions requires a leadership style that is flexible and non-authoritarian. If the purpose is to generate research hypotheses, the leader uses more structured questions, in-depth probes, and a more directive approach.

In their view, the facilitator should help develop a lively discussion, including sharing of experiences regarding the topic, in order to increase group cohesiveness. These authors recommend that facilitators recognize and admit their own biases regarding the questions so their preconceptions do not unconsciously influence the discussion (e.g. when a facilitator calls on or reinforces participants whose views she or he shares). They also stress the importance of noting gender differences in group communication and of encouraging women to speak up in groups so that their opinions are not suppressed. The facilitator must also be aware of other power and status differences amongst the group members. When participants of a group perceive a member to have higher status, they may either defer to that person or work to discredit him or her. Either way, the group may be diverted from the research topic to power and control issues (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

The facilitator's major responsibilities are to hold the group on topic and elicit a maximum amount of information from the participants. This requires probing for detail, clarity and completeness so that participants' thoughts and opinions are clearly reflected. The facilitator needs a high energy level, dependability, alertness to the social environment, ability to read and respond to non-verbal messages, assertiveness, decisiveness, willingness to assume responsibility and persistence. The facilitator also needs to be articulate, flexible, genuinely interested in hearing participants' thoughts and feelings, empathic, and able to express her or his own feelings (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

This more humanistic approach to focus group research reflects the influence of social work on a methodology that has primarily been the province of researchers with interests in marketing and related forms of consumer research. A pressing need for more literature which addresses the use of focus groups in social service contexts has been identified (Ospina, 1994). There is also a need for literature on group-oriented research techniques which is informed by a group work knowledge base. This need is beginning to be addressed as social work researchers with group work backgrounds conduct and write about focus group research (Wells and D'Angelo, 1994; Moore, 1996; Home, 1996/97; Walton, 1996/97; Pollio, 1996). It is important that group workers identify those aspects of their knowledge base which are particularly applicable to focus group research and use that knowledge, when necessary, to refine focus group methodology.

#### APPLICATION OF GROUP WORK KNOWLEDGE TO FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

This discussion draws on the experience of a researcher who broke some rules of traditional focus group research in an effort to be sensitive to the needs of subjects, to follow the principles of group work practice, and to obtain in-depth data. This researcher conducted a study examining the experiences and preferences of social workers and clients in their relationships with each other (Cohen, 1996). The study was conducted in five residential programs run by a mental health agency in the North Eastern United States. The programmes provide housing and social work services to people with histories of homelessness, substance use and psychiatric hospitalization. As survivors of the streets and the mental health system, the residents of these programmes had experienced numerous relationships with social workers and other mental health professionals.

The study used focus group methodology to explore staff and resident perspectives on client/worker relationships including: positive and negative experiences, preferred worker attributes, and the saliency of mutuality, partnership and power. Although the study did not have an overt group work focus, many of the underlying practice principles, such as mutuality, collaboration and empowerment, incorporated core group work values. The researcher's choice of methodology was informed by her knowledge of group work; however, the conflict between group work principles and the rules of traditional focus group research became apparent from the outset.

The traditional focus group literature (Morgan, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993) cautions researchers to *avoid complex topics* in focus group research. This study was designed to probe the very complex nature of client/worker relationships. and Morgan (1988) and Greenbaum (1993) also warn focus group

researchers to *avoid sensitive data*. The questions in this study touched on issues of considerable sensitivity, fostering the disclosure of intimate details about individuals' personal histories. Another rule that was breached in this study's research design was the dictum that *focus group participants should not know each other* (Krueger, 1988). Even Stewart and Shamdasani advise against *using previously formed groups*. While composing focus groups of strangers may be advantageous in consumer and marketing research, the client/worker relationship study benefited by utilizing pre-existing social networks. Focus groups were designed to build on the natural client and worker groups in each residence. This was intentionally reinforced by holding the focus groups at the residences, despite Morgan's (1988) suggestion that *natural settings are rarely used as locations for focus groups*. The research design was strongly influenced by the researcher's knowledge of small group dynamics. The intent was to harness the natural group developmental process to help the focus groups move quickly through their pre-affiliation and power and control stages (Garland *et al.*, 1978), thus enhancing their productivity.

The group interviews were structured as 'mirror-image' groups in which residents and staff were interviewed separately but were asked many of the same questions. Prior to conducting these interviews, the researcher attended numerous agency administrative meetings, staff meetings and house meetings. These various meetings provided a context in which the researcher could assess the residential environment and culture, observe group interaction, and engage potential participants in the research project. Residential settings were chosen for this project in part because of their strong emphasis on group and community living. The residents were accustomed to interacting in formal and informal groups which enhanced their comfort in the focus group discussions. Similarly, staff were used to working collaboratively in teams.

Knowledge of group development, structure and process enabled the researcher to modify and adapt focus group techniques to a particular research population and agency context without compromising the integrity of the research methodology. An understanding of group dynamics and the synergistic power of groups aided the researcher in maximizing the potential of this empirical tool to generate rich, dynamic data. As illustrated by the two vignettes that follow, group work knowledge indicated when rules needed to be broken and provided insights about how best to break them.

### A FOCUS GROUP AT A TRANSITIONAL RESIDENCE

One of the first focus groups to be conducted in this study was a client group at a transitional residence housing ten homeless men and women diagnosed with mental illness and substance misuse. It is a one-year, treatment-oriented programme with a strong emphasis on group services. The residence is loc-

ated in a renovated three-story house in a working class neighbourhood. Residents sleep two to a room and share common living and dining areas. The residence is staffed around the clock.

The researcher was invited to attend a house meeting and present her proposed study to the residents. This gave the researcher an opportunity to observe the group before discussing her project. The house meeting had many of the characteristics of a self-directed task group (Mullender and Ward, 1991) with the two staff members present functioning as consultants rather than group leaders. The group appeared to be in the differentiation stage of development (Garland *et al.*, 1978). They seemed highly cohesive and appropriately focused on tasks. Functional decision making and communication processes appeared to be firmly in place, with leadership responsibilities shared within the group. Differences were respected and the norm of mutual aid seemed well established. The residents were interested in the research project and eight of them agreed to participate in a focus group interview.

A winter storm was raging on the evening of the client focus group. The residents seemed impressed that the researcher had braved the elements to come and talk with them. Six of the eight residents who initially volunteered were present. The focus group consisted of three men and three women in their twenties and thirties. All six had extensive histories of psychiatric hospitalization and treatment for substance misuse. All had been homeless. Each was in individual psychotherapy, attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and participated in several weekly therapy and activity groups.

In view of the group's developmental stage and their experience together in groups, the researcher anticipated that the residents would be relatively comfortable talking freely together about their experiences in relationships with social workers. This assumption proved correct. As the interview got underway, with the blizzard outside creating an atmosphere of warmth and safety inside, members began sharing details about some extremely painful experiences.

Theresa,<sup>1</sup> a woman in her twenties, described being severely abused as a child in foster care and having her social worker refuse to believe her when she told her about the abuse. Geoff, a man in his late thirties, acknowledged Theresa's feelings of abandonment and offered his support. He then described, in vivid detail, his own experience with a social worker who was extremely unsupportive when Geoff disclosed a highly traumatic event, a gang rape which led to his suicide attempt and subsequent hospitalization.

The researcher sensed that she alone in the group was hearing this information for the first time. Geoff did not appear to be trying to work out his feelings about this long ago experience or seeking the group's support. Rather, he appeared to be testing the researcher to see if she, unlike the

<sup>1</sup> The names of the focus group participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

original worker, would be responsive. The researcher decided that she would have to break some focus group rules. She began by violating the *no head-nodding* rule (Krueger, 1988) and maintained full eye contact with Geoff as he recounted:

At first she said nothing, she would not even look at me. Then she told me that I was the biggest goddamn victim she had ever met and that I should just grow up. . . . I can't tell you how horrible I felt, like I had been violated, betrayed. That experience just took away all my trust. It was horrible to trust someone and have that trust violated. It was a long time before I could trust a social worker again.

The researcher chose her next words very carefully. She acknowledged Geoff's experience of having been violated by the men who raped him and then again by the worker who violated his trust. She validated the depth of his pain and pointed out his strengths in overcoming trauma. Finally, she noted that one of the goals of her research was for social workers and social work students to learn from experiences like Geoff's, to gain a better understanding of what clients wanted and needed from social workers.

The researcher breached much more than the no head-nodding rule. Morgan explicitly states that the content of focus group discussion should relate to what the researcher needs to know rather than on members' needs. By shifting the discussion to the feeling and process concerns embedded in Geoff's statement, the researcher consciously gave primacy to his needs, rather than to the content needed for her study. Moreover, the traditional research literature clearly emphasizes the importance of focus group facilitators maintaining a detached and non-responsive stance throughout the session (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). Yet not to respond to Geoff's traumatic experience would have completely contradicted the client-centered values underpinning the research project. It certainly would not have been good group work practice. Group theory suggests that Geoff, in testing the researcher, was probably acting on behalf of the group as a whole. A lack of response might have alienated all the group members, undermining their ability to trust the researcher and making them reluctant to share information with her. The situation clearly called for a sensitive and empathic response. While at odds with the traditional focus group rules, the researcher's response was consistent with Stewart and Shamdasani's (1990) guidelines which allow for less structured groups, greater in-depth probing, and some expression of the facilitator's feelings.

The traditional literature also states that the facilitator should *keep group members on topic, refocusing the discussion when it moves off task* (Axlerod, 1979; Krueger, 1988; Morgan 1988). In responding to Geoff, the facilitator took the initiative in shifting, briefly, away from the research topic. Rather than defocusing the interview, responding to Geoff's painful experience served to build trust and group cohesion. The interview moved back on topic



when the facilitator linked Geoff's traumatic experience with the purpose of the study.

Later, as the focus group drew to a close, Geoff commented sardonically to the researcher, 'I think you got a bit more from us than you bargained for'. The researcher replied that Geoff was right, she had expected to learn a lot from them but had not been prepared to feel so personally moved by the experience. While this personal disclosure violated Krueger (1988) and Morgan's (1988) rules about researcher detachment and impersonality, it was consistent with the principles of group work and with the study's emphasis on mutuality and relationship.

This vignette illustrates an important point. By tempering the rigors of focus group methodology with group work knowledge and skill, the researcher was able to respond with humanity and professionalism without abandoning her role as focus group facilitator. As the second vignette demonstrates, this was not always possible.

#### A FOCUS GROUP AT A PERMANENT RESIDENCE

The final focus group conducted in this study took place in a newly opened residence for homeless women with psychiatric and substance misuse diagnoses. It occupies a large, well-maintained Victorian home. In contrast to the transitional residence, it is operated as permanent housing rather than as a treatment facility. Residents have private bedrooms and share common living areas. Agency staff are on site two days a week and available by 'phone at other times. They work with residents individually and facilitate weekly house meetings.

The researcher's first meeting with clients in the women's residence took place three months after the house opened. Four women were living in the house, leaving three vacant rooms. This was a recently formed group and the women spoke openly about their difficulty organizing and sharing household responsibilities. JoJo and Helen were in their twenties and had moved into the residence the week that it opened. Donna, who moved in the following month, was in her late thirties. Cora was in her early sixties and had spent much of her life in institutional settings. At the time of the interview, she had been living in the house for three weeks.

The researcher's initial contact with the women took place at a regularly-scheduled house meeting. Donna's leadership role in the group was evident. She was almost always the first person to speak to an issue and the other women tended to direct their comments to her. Cora appeared lost in the discussion at times, and frequently looked to Donna for support. Donna sat next to Cora and tried to help her follow the flow of conversation. JoJo and

Helen sat together and tended to support each other's comments but were clearly engaged in the group as a whole.

The researcher was impressed by the extent of cohesion and mutual aid present in such a recently formed group. Assessing the group using Schiller's (1994) relational model of development derived from feminist theory and research on women's groups, they appeared to be completing the tasks of establishing a relational base and beginning to enter the stage characterized by mutuality and empathy. After an explanation of the research project, the women accepted the researcher's invitation to participate in the study. A focus group interview was scheduled for one week later, at a mutually agreed upon day and time.

The researcher appeared at the appointed time and sensed some tension among the three women assembled in the living room. Donna explained that Helen was in her room, having an argument with her boyfriend. It was unclear whether she would be joining the focus group. JoJo informed the researcher that she had just returned from a four-day psychiatric hospitalization and was not certain how much she would be able to participate. The researcher offered to come back another day but the group members indicated that they wanted to proceed.

JoJo participated actively during the first ten minutes of the interview but then began fidgeting in her seat. After struggling to answer one of the questions, she went to the kitchen for a glass of water. When she returned to the living room, she stood in the doorway rather than resuming her seat in the group. When the researcher asked JoJo if she would be more comfortable dropping out of the focus group session and possibly scheduling an individual interview, Donna spoke for the group and suggested postponing the entire group interview. She explained that it was not only JoJo who was having a bad day but that all of them were tired and distracted, having just had a two-hour house meeting. Cora agreed that they had already been in too many meetings for one day. The women were apologetic. They emphasized their continued interest in participating in the study, repeating that they were just very tired from their previous meeting. The researcher agreed to reschedule and helped the group come up with a more suitable meeting time.

The researcher's flexibility in rescheduling this meeting reflected a departure from traditional focus group norms. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) make it clear that *it is the role of the facilitator to set the ground rules for focus groups*. In all of the focus groups in the client/worker relationship study (Cohen, 1996), the temporal and spatial arrangements (date, time, length and location of the sessions and even the arrangement of chairs) were jointly determined by the researcher and focus group members. In acceding to the preference of group members to postpone the interview, the researcher further compromised the rule of maintaining facilitator control over ground rules. Moreover, she violated the injunction to *emphasize manifest content rather*

*than process* (Morgan, 1988). JoJo's non-verbal behaviour was probed, not simply recorded, as the literature recommends (Morgan, 1988) revealing that the group members were tired and having difficulty concentrating. Failing to probe these process concerns would have resulted in the group proceeding with members who were not fully engaged in the group interview, while potentially undermining social group work principles. By responding to the needs of group members, the researcher modelled the value of client-centeredness while increasing the likelihood of having a more productive data-gathering session at a later date.

The rescheduled focus group took place five days later with two residents missing. JoJo was back in the hospital and Helen was visiting her. A new resident, Loretta, had moved into the house the night before. She was eager to participate in the group interview. Donna expressed her view that the focus group should take place as planned, since it had already been postponed once. Cora agreed. The size of this three person focus group was much smaller than that recommended by the literature which suggests *group sizes ranging from six to ten* (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993). Moreover, two of the group members knew each other, again violating the rule of *avoiding pre-formed groups* (Krueger, 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

Developmentally, this group was at the start of the process of establishing a relational base (Schiller, 1994). The focus group marked Loretta's entry into the household. She was initially very quiet but gradually began to disclose some personal experiences relevant to the topics under discussion. Questions about client/worker relationships stirred up some powerful and unresolved issues between Loretta and her last worker whom she experienced as cold, judgemental and demeaning. Loretta began to cry as she described how abandoned she felt. The researcher made the deliberate decision to shed her objective social scientist mantle and, with it, the role of focus group leader. She donned the role of mutual aid group facilitator in order to promote interpersonal empathy and support within the small group. Acknowledging the pain in Loretta's voice, the facilitator indicated that it was all right for the group to forget about the interview questions for a while. The focus group rules had been temporarily suspended.

The facilitator credited Loretta with being able to share very personal feelings with a group of people she had just met. She noted some similarities between the relationship Loretta had described and those discussed by other group members. She turned to the group and invited their response. Donna was quick to assume her customary role as socio-emotional leader, reaching out to Loretta to establish connection and mutuality while including Cora in the group's deepening affiliation. What had begun as a focus group became a support group. When the group facilitator sensed that Loretta had received the empathic connection and support she was seeking, she asked the group

members if they felt ready to resume the interview. They became a focus group once again.

The mutual aid potential in the group had been palpable and was readily tapped. Donna and Cora were part of a larger group in which the norm of mutual aid was well established. Loretta had exhibited a high level of trust in the group through her disclosure of strong feelings. Helping the mutual aid process unfold was not a difficult task. Group work skills were necessary, however, to rapidly assess the changing needs of the individual and the group (Shulman, 1992). The facilitator's primary intervention was to let the group know that they had the option of shifting from a research group mode to a support group mode, and subsequently to determine the appropriate point at which to suggest that they might switch back. Her decision to go with the socio-emotional needs of the group and her comfort in making the transition was influenced by her group work training and experience. When social group work principles came into direct conflict with research protocols, there was little question for her of which would take priority.

A researcher lacking group work training might have discouraged Loretta's disclosures in the first place. Certainly, the focus group literature would recommend against such *movement away from the original purpose of the group* (Krueger, 1988) and failure to *keep the group on task* (Axlerod, 1979; Morgan, 1988). Most likely, some of the richness of the data would have been diluted as a result, and an important opportunity for growth through connection would have been lost. Alternatively, someone without group work skills might have been uncomfortable with the depth of emotion expressed and simply let the process run its course without providing members with any guidance or parameters related to the change in group purpose. Norms for acceptable group behaviour would have been ambiguous, the opportunity for growth and support might have been diminished, and the data collection process would, almost certainly, have been undermined.

It is important to distinguish between the two focus group situations. At the transitional residence, the researcher drew on her group work skills to assess the meaning of a member's comments and respond empathically. It was not deemed necessary or appropriate to alter the purpose of the group or to modify the role of the facilitator. Although some of the more rigid principles of traditional focus group research might have been breached, the facilitator remained within the bounds of what is considered permissible in social science focus group research.

The group interview at the women's residence trespassed on even the relatively flexible boundaries of Stewart and Shamdasini's (1990) approach to focus group research. In this instance the researcher broke almost every rule in every book! She used focus group methodology for a *complex and sensitive topic* which then prevented the interview from *staying on task and main-*

*taining its clear research purpose* (Morgan, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993). The researcher then compounded her transgressions by abandoning her *detached, impersonal researcher stance* (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988) in favour of a connected, sensitive group work stance. She ignored the principle that focus groups should be *directed at answering questions, not solving problems* (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). She encouraged the group to *shift its focus* (Axlerod, 1979; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) to socio-emotional concerns. In what was probably the biggest breach of all, the researcher *changed the group purpose* (Krueger, 1988), *away from the researcher's needs to the members' needs* (Morgan, 1988).

The decision to change group purpose, focus, tasks and roles directly reflected group work principles. Using a combination of group work and research knowledge and skills, the facilitator was able to help the group change its purpose when Loretta's need for support and mutual aid emerged, and then change again when the socio-emotional work was completed. This focus group session was quite successful in generating rich and powerful data. Data gathering was facilitated by the researcher's ability to be flexible and 'tuned in' to the needs of the group.

### CHANGING THE RULES

There is inherent potential for role conflict between the role of social researcher/data gatherer and the role of social group worker. It is always possible to elicit data of an unanticipated nature in social science research. This is particularly the case in qualitative research utilizing somewhat flexible interview schedules, such as focus group research. Informants may bring up issues which are unresolved and upsetting. There is always the potential for interviews to become personal and emotional. Social group workers pride themselves on their ability to be sensitive to the needs of clients and to handle unanticipated group situations. It would be inappropriate for a worker to remain in a strict data-gathering role and to ignore the issues, feelings and needs of participants. Group workers are educated to respond empathically to group members. They possess the necessary skills to intervene and help group members work collectively to solve problems. When an unanticipated situation arises in a focus group, it may be necessary and appropriate to change roles from data gatherer to helper, support person or mediator, in order to assist a member. At times, it may even be necessary to alter the purpose of the group in order to help a member resolve a situation or in order to be responsive to a particular set of group dynamics. Rather than indicating a transgression of an inviolable rule, this may signal the need to change the rule.

As we have attempted to illustrate, the potential for obtaining rich and

meaningful data through the medium of group process is increased when group work and research skills are integrated and researcher and research subject's needs are not dichotomized. Knowledge of group development and dynamics coupled with the skills of: clarifying purpose, tuning in, focusing, and maintaining simultaneous focus on the individual and the group constitute potent tools for effective focus group research. The profession's value base can be undermined if social work researchers uncritically use a business-oriented tool without adapting it to a social work context. By integrating group work knowledge with research knowledge, focus group research protocols can be modified and refined in a responsible fashion, in order to prove a better fit with the values and goals of social work research. Perhaps, rather than breaking the rules, social work researchers can take the lead in revising them to be more sensitive to the socio-emotional needs of research subjects.

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