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A comparison of group-based research methods

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Abstract

In the modern era, group-based methods have come to largely dominate qualitative research, particularly in the commercial arena of market research. The most commonly used method is the "focus group" technique, which involves a group of strangers being directed to discuss a pre-determined set of topics. In reality, in many parts of the world, including Australia where this study was conducted, focus groups are often employed as the default technique without systematically questioning the appropriateness of methodological characteristics or the impact they have on the resultant data. This empirical study compares two different group-based methods - the "focus group" approach and the "unfocused group discussion technique" - to identify differences in the data obtained. Differences are found in regard to a number of aspects including the non-verbal group dynamics, and the extent to which participants say everything they want to say and are able to express their true thoughts and feelings. Findings reinforce the importance of considering alternative methods when designing group-based research studies and provide empirical evidence to inform such methodological decision-making. A future agenda for group-based methodological research is discussed.

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Abstract

In the modern era, group-based methods have come to largely dominate qualitative research, particularly in the commercial arena of market research. The most commonly used method is the "focus group" technique, which involves a group of strangers being directed to discuss a pre-determined set of topics. In reality, in many parts of the world, including Australia where this study was conducted, focus groups are often employed as the default technique without systematically questioning the appropriateness of methodological characteristics or the impact they have on the resultant data. This empirical study compares two different group-based methods – the "focus group" approach and the "unfocused group discussion technique" – to identify differences in the data obtained. Differences are found in regard to a number of aspects including the non-verbal group dynamics, and the extent to which participants say everything they want to say and are able to express their true thoughts and feelings. Findings reinforce the importance of considering alternative methods when designing group-based research studies and provide empirical evidence to inform such methodological decision-making. A future agenda for group-based methodological research is discussed.

1.   Introduction

Group-based research methods were originally used in the early 20th century for scale development (e.g. Bogardus, 1926) and then subsequently by social scientists after World War II to investigate the effects of post-war propaganda (Merton & Kendall, 1946). Today, group-based research dominates qualitative research in the commercial, social and political spheres. In 2002 an estimated 218,000 groups were conducted in the US at a value of approximately $7 billion, while another 245,000 groups were conducted in Europe, Latin America and Asia-Pacific (Marketing Research Association, 2012).

In some countries group-based research has evolved to include a range of different methodologies, from highly structured group discussions to more naturalistic and flexible encounters between participants. In other countries, however, including the US and Australia (the latter being the setting for the current study), one approach has come to dominate group-based research particularly in the commercial arena – known most commonly as the "focus group" method.

The "focus group" approach is almost universally prescribed by modern market research text books as the method for conducting group-based research (Bradley, 2010; Churchill, Brown, & Suter, 2007; Hyman & Sierra, 2010; Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2006; Proctor, 2005; Wilson, Johns, Miller, & Pentecost, 2010; Zikmund & Babin, 2010). This involves assembling a group of 6 to10 people who do not know each other in a central location, usually a customised research room with mirrored viewing facilities that allow others (usually those commissioning the research) to watch the group as it happens. The researcher develops a discussion outline and actively directs the discussion to cover all topics within the specified timeframe (usually 1 to 2 hours). This approach is extensively used across social sciences disciplines including, for example, marketing (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Verdurme & Viaene, 2003), social work (Smyth & Michail, 2010), health (Pool, Poell, & ten Cate, 2013), psychology (Bergin, Talley, & Hamer, 2003) and education (Osborne & Collins, 2001). In addition to the focus group method featuring prominently in of much of the academic literature, empirical evidence confirms that it is also the method by far most commonly used in practice by market and social research agencies for group-based research in Australia (Randle, Mackay, & Dudley, 2012).

There has been some commentary on the merits of varying particular aspects of this method, primarily from the disciplines of sociology (Morgan, 1996), health (Khan & Manderson, 1992) and education (Parker & Tritter, 2006). In particular, the degree to which group discussions should be directed by researchers has been debated since the 1940s when US psychotherapist Carl Rogers proposed the "nondirective method" for attitude and personality research (Rogers, 1945). Rogers proposed that the participant be responsible for directing the discussion and that the researcher accept rather than evaluate their views. He argues that this approach eliminates researcher bias and allows the subject to access and express deeper emotions and attitudes. Others have since proposed variations of the nondirective approach in a group setting, for example Morgan (1988) described the notion of "self-managed groups" (p.51), in which the moderator takes a passive role and allows the group to determine the direction of the conversation, while Khan and Manderson (1992) discussed "informal focused group discussions" (p.60) which involve natural groupings and also give control of the discussion over to participants.

One group-based approach which has been used in practice since the 1970s for marketing and social research in Australia is the "unfocused group discussion technique" (Mackay, 2012).

This technique aims to minimise the experimental effect of the focus group experience and create a situation that is as close as possible to participants' everyday lives. It prescribes that participants be members of naturally occurring groups – such as friends, work colleagues or neighbours – and that the group be conducted in its natural habitat (i.e. where members would naturally meet – for example one of their homes, a workplace or their local club). Ideally, the groups involved in this technique include five to seven members, and never more than eight. The moderator's role is passive; he or she typically introduces the topic and then says nothing else for the entire discussion, instead letting the conversation take its natural course. The technique discourages the use of video recording because of its potential to alter the natural group dynamic and resulting discussion. No time limit is set; the natural end to the discussion is the appropriate time to conclude.

Researchers generally agree on the importance of design decisions for group-based research: "the decisions taken by the researcher may affect significantly the resulting discussion and have implications for sampling, setting, control, validity and reliability" (Lunt, 1996, p.80). However, this assertion is usually based on the researcher's hypotheses regarding the effects of methodological factors on the data obtained, rather than sound empirical evidence. Where empirical evidence is available findings are often contradictory, for example in relation to whether strangers or naturally occurring groups are more appropriate for studies involving "sensitive topics" (Kitzinger, 1994; Leask, Hawe, & Chapman, 2001). Previous researchers have recognised this gap and called for more empirical research: "experimental studies are necessary to evaluate alternative qualitative approaches" (Khan & Manderson, 1992, p.65).

The present study attempts to contribute to building such a base of empirical knowledge. We compare the two alternative methods of group-based research described above – the typical focus group approach (referred to for the remainder of this paper as *focus groups*) and the unfocused group discussion technique (referred to henceforth as *unfocused groups*). We examine whether the group-based research technique influences the first-order (Schutz, 1967) (or raw) data obtained; and if so, how it differs. Specifically, does the method affect;

1. the number of topics discussed?
2. the range of topics discussed?
3. the length of discussion?
4. the intensity of participant engagement?
5. the non-verbal dynamics (interest in the discussion, enthusiasm about making a contribution, interaction with other participants)?
6. participant frustration (whether participants said everything they wanted to say on the topic)?
7. participant truthfulness (whether participants expressed their true thoughts and feelings)?

2.   Literature Review

For the most part, the topics discussed within a group are determined by the role the moderator assumes and the degree to which they direct the discussion to cover specific topics (Morgan, 1988; Robinson, 1999). An actively moderated group will discuss each topic in the

discussion guide and any topic peripheral to this, or which goes for longer than its allocated time, will be promptly re-directed by the moderator. In contrast, non-moderated groups discuss any topics they choose, and for as long as naturally occurs. Madriz (2000) reported that giving groups more control resulted in them straying from the discussion guide and "tapping into areas of the topic that I had not previously considered. The process added a wealth of information to my research and gave me new insights" (p.846). In this scenario, it is also likely that the topics of particular interest to the group will receive greater (longer) attention, inevitably resulting in fewer total topics being discussed. This view is reinforced by Lunt (1996) who states "in our experience, people do not talk at length or with interest about an issue on which they have nothing meaningful to say".

Other empirical studies report contradictory evidence, for example Fern (1982) found no difference between moderated and non-moderated groups in the number of ideas generated or the quality of ideas. However in his study the "un-moderated" groups received written (not oral) instructions to guide the discussion, so participants were not actually in control of the topics discussed. Similarly, Nelson & Frontczak (1988) found small interaction and acquaintanceship effects and concluded that groups can be composed of strangers, couples or acquaintances with relatively little effect on idea quantity. Again, methodological considerations raise questions regarding findings, as each participant in the couple groups knew one person well (their partner) but all of the other couples were strangers, and the acquaintance groups included members of a large social club who theoretically might have never even met before.

Our first four hypotheses are based on the premise that left to their own devices a natural group, where individuals all know each other well, discusses topics that are relevant to them (regardless of if they fit within the scope of the relevant discussion guide). Furthermore, because of the relevance of the topics the group spends longer on fewer topics but discuss them with greater intensity and engagement.

H1: Focus groups discuss a greater number of topics than unfocused groups.

H2: Unfocused groups discuss a wider range of topics than focus groups (evidenced by discussion of topics outside the scope of the discussion guide).

H3: Unfocused groups discuss topics at greater length (evidenced by the amount of time spent on each topic).

H4: Participants in the unfocused groups demonstrate greater engagement in the topics discussed (indicated by the degree of questioning and probing by other participants).

One of the key strengths of group-based research is the "synergy" (Kitzinger, 1994) created in the group environment which generates momentum and allows opinions, beliefs, feelings and attitudes to emerge in parallel with individual experiences (Parker & Tritter, 2006). This synergy, also referred to as the non-verbal dynamics of the group (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010), has been described as of equal importance as participants' verbal comments in group-based research (Robinson, 1999) and has been credited for revealing underlying feelings and attitudes of participants, for example racism, power relationships and cultural nuances (Swenson, Griswold, & Kleiber, 1992). However despite the agreed importance of participant interaction and group dynamics, literature reviews of focus group studies have found that the nature of interactions between individuals and the group as a whole are rarely reported (Belzile & Öberg, 2012).

One exception was Leask et al. (2001) who compared the non-verbal dynamics of constructed groups (strangers) and pre-existing groups and found the constructed groups to be more animated, enthusiastic, engage in more complex discussion of the topics and express a wider range of views. Conversely, naturally occurring groups were flatter, less enthusiastic and conformed to social norms; and in these groups the moderator needed to prompt more in order to stimulate discussion. The authors suggest that groups of strangers are more eager to share their story with a group of people they do not know. Based on this evidence, we expect to find differences in the non-verbal dynamics of the focus groups and unfocused groups.

> H5: Focus groups generate more enthusiastic and energetic non-verbal group dynamics than unfocused groups.

Few studies consider and/or report on the impact that the group research experience has on participants. Those that do consider this important perspective usually conduct post-group questionnaires or phone calls with participants. For example, in their study of community journalists and leaders in rural areas, Swenson et al. (1992) conducted follow up questionnaires and found that participating in the group-based research had impacted individuals' thinking and focussed their attention on specific community issues and their role in addressing them. In a more recent study Leask (2001) conducted follow up phone calls with participants and reported constructed groups enjoying the experience more but natural groups finding the experience more informative.

To our knowledge there is currently no empirical evidence regarding whether certain group-based methods are more effective in allowing participants to say everything they would like to say, effectively minimising their level of frustration in this regard. Intuitively, it seems reasonable that unstructured group discussions, where participants control the time spent on each topic, are more likely to give participants the chance to have their say before the discussion naturally moves to the next topic. It is on this premise that we hypothesise that the unfocused group technique will be more effective in minimising participant frustration.

> H6: Participants in the unfocused groups are less frustrated, in terms of being able to say everything they want to say, than participants in the focus groups.

Also receiving relatively little attention amongst scholars is the extent to which group-based research participants actually express their true thoughts and feelings during the group discussion. Some suggest that strangers may be reluctant to engage with one another (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Clapper, 1998; Parker & Tritter, 2006) and that natural groupings are more productive because of the natural ease of the conversation (Wells, 1974). However the dominant view, particularly within marketing research, has been a preference for using strangers in focus group research because anonymity reduces inhibitions and increases the likelihood of individuals being open and honest as they are unlikely to see each other again (Krueger, 1988). The notion of anonymity enabling uninhibited expression has received empirical support, for example from studies comparing the collection of sensitive information through online versus face-to-face channels (Montoya-Weiss et al., 1998) or phone interviews conducted by automated machines versus real people (Reddy et al., 2006). Others have focused on the problems which can occur when natural groups are used, such as the desire to comply with social norms (Leask et al., 2001) or the discussion reflecting pre-existing social hierarchies, which can be the case for example with managers and subordinates in a work environment (Robinson, 1999). Based on this body of evidence, we expect that focus groups will result in participants being more truthful in expressing their real thoughts and feelings.

H7: Focus groups participants are more truthful than participants in the unfocused groups.

3.   Material and Methods

3.1 Study design

The differences between the two group-based research methods compared are summarised in Table 1.

- Insert Table 1 about here –

The study included two phases. In phase 1 the research question was investigated by conducting three group discussions using each of the two methods. All six groups were moderated by the same researcher who is experienced in both techniques. Focus groups were observed by two researchers from behind the one-way mirror. Unfocused groups were observed by only one researcher, as it would have been too disruptive to have more without discrete viewing facilities available in participants' homes. The moderator and observers took detailed notes on the content and the non-verbal dynamics of the group discussions. The content of the Phase 1 discussions was used to test hypotheses H1 through 4 (number and range of topics, length of discussion and intensity of engagement), and the observations of the moderator and observer were used to test hypothesis H5 (non-verbal dynamics). In total, 42 individuals participated in the six group discussions conducted in Phase 1.

Phase 2 involved telephoning all participants within one week of the group discussions and asking about their experience of the group discussions. This information was also used to test hypothesis H5 (non-verbal dynamics), hypothesis H6 (participant frustration) and hypothesis H7 (participant truthfulness). All 42 Phase 1 participants agreed to participate in Phase 2, and all were contacted except one person who could not be reached as her number had been disconnected.

3.2 Discussion topic

A key criterion for choosing a discussion topic was that it be reasonably complex, yet interesting to participants and a topic they were likely to have an opinion on. Secondly, it should be broadly relevant to both marketing and social sciences – the areas of interest of the research team. Thirdly, the design needed to include a sample that could be recruited within the funding limitations, with sampling criteria that was reasonably achievable.

The discussion topic was: what is it like to be a woman in her mid-60s in contemporary Australia? This topic is inherently interesting to the sample (women in their mid-60s): they were asked to talk about themselves. In addition, we know anecdotally that this particular socio-demographic group is notoriously willing to talk. It could therefore be argued that if differences were found between techniques with this sample and topic, then it is likely that differences would be present with less vocal groups on less personally interesting topics.

3.3 Sample

The sample was women in their mid-60s who live in each of the three local government areas where groups were held. Participants in the focus groups received a cash incentive of $80. Focus group participants were recruited by a commercial agency and individually invited to participate.

For the unfocused groups, one individual who met the screening criteria was contacted by the recruitment agency and asked if they had a group of about 6 to 7 friends who were also female and in their mid-60s. This person (the group organiser) invited her friends and organised the venue. The group organiser received a cash incentive of $180, all other unfocused group participants received $80. These incentive amounts are regarded as the current industry standard for commercial research in Australia.

3.4 Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted between February and May 2012. During phase 1, three groups of 6 to 8 participants were held per method – one each in the North Sydney, Parramatta and Hurstville local government areas of Sydney, Australia. Focus groups were held in commercial research premises with mirrored viewing facilities and were audio and video recorded. Focus groups lasted for a set duration of 90 minutes.

Unfocused groups were held in the location where the group would usually meet (in all cases this was the group organiser's home) and discussions were audio recorded only. No time limit was set so discussions lasted until they reached a natural conclusion.

At the end of each group discussion participants gave permission for researchers to conduct the follow-up phone calls within one week. Phone interviews lasted between 3 and 10 minutes and were audio recorded for transcription and analysis.

3.5 Measures

A detailed discussion guide was developed for the focus group discussions (see Appendix 1). It comprised topics considered relevant by the researchers including an introduction and warm up (15 mins), general lifestyle (10 mins), relationships (10 mins), housing (10 mins), work and civic life (10 mins), health and wellbeing (10 mins), leisure and entertainment (10 mins), comparison with previous and future generations (15 mins), close and thanks/final comments.

For the unfocused groups, the moderator explained the nature of the discussion procedure and that we were interested in understanding what it is like to be them: women in their mid-60s in contemporary Australia. They could talk about anything that interested them or that they felt would give insight into what it is like to be them. After this introduction the moderator said nothing for the remainder of the discussion (the moderator introduction is included as Appendix 2).

While conversational in style, the follow up phone calls were structured to include the following questions. (1) overall, how did you feel about the group discussion?; (2) to what extent did you feel you had the chance to say everything you wanted to say?; (3) were there any moments in the discussion where you felt reluctant or uncomfortable talking about your own experience?; and (4) thinking of the experience overall, do you feel you ended up saying what you really think and feel?

3.6 Comparison procedure

The variables of interest were (1) number of topics discussed; (2) range of topics discussed; (3) length of discussion; (4) intensity of engagement; (5) non-verbal dynamics; (6) participant frustration; and (7) participant truthfulness.

Group discussions were transcribed and included time-stamps after every individual contribution or every change of topic. Transcripts were coded according to the topics discussed (for example, children, grandchildren, paid work, unpaid work, physical health issues, mental health issues etc.). Once this coding was complete, the number of seconds spent on each topic was calculated. Length of discussion and intensity of engagement were also compared based on the observations of the moderator and observers who were located in the viewing room behind the mirror. Non-verbal dynamics were compared based on the observations of the moderator and the observers, and from participant comments during follow-up phone calls. The comparison of whether individuals said everything they wanted to say and expressed their true thoughts and feelings was based on analysis of the content of participants' qualitative responses to the questions in the follow-up phone calls.

The first stage of the comparison was performed by the researcher who observed all six group discussions. The second stage of analysis involved discussing the data and findings at length with both the researcher who moderated all six groups and the researcher who observed only the focus group discussions. This ongoing process of consultation and refinement ensured that all three researchers reached agreement on the insights and conclusions being drawn from the comparison.

4.   Results and Discussion

Figure 1 summarises the topics discussed during the groups and the length of time spent on each topic. The left hand column lists the topics discussed. Each of the columns represents one of the six group discussions, with the three focus groups on the left and the three unfocused groups on the right. The degree of shading indicates the length of time spent on each topic, with no shading indicating the group did not discuss the topic at all, and the black cells indicating the group spent more than eight minutes on that particular topic (refer to key in Figure 1).

- Insert Figure 1 about here –

4.1 Number of topics

As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of cells in the focus group columns have some degree of shading, indicated that most topics were discussed at some point. This is not unexpected, since participants were directed to discuss each topic and if the conversation strayed it would be bought back on track by the moderator. In some cases, rather than say nothing on a topic that was irrelevant to them, participants expressed the personal irrelevance of that topic to the group, for example in relation to leisure time activities:

> *"Well I'm working so much, I work six days a week so I don't have any time. I'm too tired." Focus group participant.*

Conversely, the three columns for the unfocused groups include many more white cells representing topics not discussed at all. This simple but effective visual analysis supports the hypothesis that focus groups discuss more topics than unfocused groups (H1).

4.2 Range of topics

Focus groups raised some personal topics they were comfortable discussing in front of a group of strangers, such as dysfunctional familial relationships and financial difficulties.

> *"So I have no-one to give me money. I've put on two stone in weight because I live on bread because I can't afford to eat vegies and fruit."*
> *Focus group participant.*

Unfocused groups also raised sensitive topics but they were inherently different, more personally intimate and reflective, for example personal experiences of menopause. Unfocused groups discussed their feelings about growing older, such as feeling invisible and their opinion not mattering any more. There was also discussion of topics outside of the focus group discussion guide, such as current affairs and media stories, and of people they all knew who were going through trauma or illness. (Note that the later topic mentioned here was not raised in the focus groups which is perhaps not surprising as they had no mutual acquaintances, however it is possible that focus group participants could refer to people they know but who are unknown to the others in the group, although this did not happen for this topic in this study). These conversations provided insight into issues occupying their thoughts or which were important to them (e.g. death) but may not necessarily have affected them personally.

> *"Yeah her father died of emphysema and she was telling me when [he] was going in the ambulance with the oxygen he was still trying to put a smoke in his mouth."* Unfocused group participant.

Figure 1 illustrates that the focus group discussions stayed within the boundaries of the topics specified in the pre-determined guide, as is typical of group discussions which are actively directed by a moderator. It is also evident that the focus group discussions covered almost all of the elements of the discussion guide, many of which were not discussed by the unfocussed groups (e.g. housing). However, the unfocussed groups did raise topics which were outside of those specified in the original focus group discussion guide, particularly personal topics like menopause and ageing. Therefore, whilst the data does not strongly support the hypothesis that unfocused groups discuss a wider range of topics than focus groups (H2), it does support the notion that they discuss different topics, some of which were not specified in the pre-developed focus group guide.

4.3 Length of discussion

The shading in Figure 1 indicates that for the most part, focus groups discussed topics for a short to moderate length of time (demonstrated by the light to moderate degree of shading in most cells). In contrast, while fewer topics were discussed by the unfocused groups (indicated by more non-shaded cells), the topics they did cover were discussed at greater length (indicated by more dark and black cells). This supports the hypothesis that unfocused groups discuss some topics in at greater length than focus groups (H3).

4.4 Intensity of engagement

The consequence of focus groups being directed from topic to topic within specified time frames was no indication of how long each discussion might have lasted otherwise. In an effort for participants in the focus groups to all have their say on each topic, exchanges between participants sometimes presented as a list of unlinked opinions. For example the following was a sequential exchange in one focus group:

> *Participant 1: My mother never drove.*
>
> *Participant 2: My mum did.*
>
> *Participant 3: My mother had a licence.*
>
> *Participant 2: My mum had an FJ Holden.*
>
> *Participant 1: Mum never drove, she had five children.*
>
> *Participant 2: Most women didn't drive in those days.*
>
> *Participant 4: My dad didn't get his licence until he was in his 40s.*

This is not to say that the entire focus group discussion took the form of one line answers, but the example given does illustrate the point that, particularly when a new topic was introduced, participants would often offer immediate responses which were all contributed at the same time and therefore presented as a list of unlinked comments or opinions.

In contrast, unfocused group members listened more intently to each other and asked questions or added to the conversation until the topic naturally changed. The discussion was more multi-faceted and covered more topics, for example the group might start talking about gardening (leisure time), then move to concerns about the quality of produce (current affairs), then to how good they feel when they eat well (health) and then back to growing vegetables (leisure time). This more complex interaction provided greater context for the topics being discussed. In addition, because the unfocused groups could guide the discussion themselves, the relative importance of different topics became evident by the level of interest of group members, the number of participants who contributed and the length of time spent on each topic. This evidence supports the hypothesis regarding greater participant engagement in unfocused groups (H4).

4.5 Non-verbal dynamics

Interaction between participants in the focus groups was initially subdued and their comments were directed towards the moderator, somewhat like students in a classroom. A degree of initial unease was expressed by participants:

> *"I felt uncomfortable in the beginning." Focus group participant.*

There was also inhibition in the initial stages of focus groups, with apparent contradictions between participants' introductory statements and later contributions. This may have been because initial introductions were inflated to present a positive image to the group, with later statements once the group had become more relaxed and familiar being more in line with reality. For example when one participant introduced herself she stated that she had two children and:

> *"I've never had a moment's problem with either of them." Focus group participant.*

Then later she talked about the problems she'd had with her children and that their relationship had deteriorated:

> *"He's got barriers, I've got barriers, so we look at one another and we get into a blue ... that's what they're angry with me about." Focus group participant.*

The unfocused groups were relaxed and lively from the very start. In all cases participants had met at their friend's house shortly before the researchers arrived and were already in conversation, often laughing and joking with each other. When asked to commence the discussion someone would start with a joke or they would just continue what they had been talking about previously. Examples of initial discussion statements were:

> *Group A:*   *Should you just finish telling us what you were telling us about [grandson]... just finish that off.*

> *Group B:*   *Participant 1: What, the menopausal women? (all laughing)*
> *Participant 2: Stop joking and get on with it!*

It is also worth noting that the general tone of the focus groups was quite negative. For example, participants expressed resentment towards their children for having better lifestyles than they did or do, of being expected to mind grandchildren, of having to look after aging parents, or of having to keep working because their financial situation does not allow them to retire.

> *"I resent giving up so much of my time so [my children] can go and get the second wage and have this lifestyle." Focus group participant.*

In contrast, the tone of unfocused groups was more balanced. Some topics were discussed in a negative tone, but this was balanced by other conversations that were very positive – for example about family and leisure time activities they enjoy or reminiscing about old times. Results support the hypothesis that unfocused group non-verbal dynamics are more energetic and enthusiastic than focus groups (H5).

4.6 Participant frustration

Focus groups acknowledged that the discussion had been moved on when necessary by the moderator and that they could have said more on the topic; however they were also aware of the need to get through multiple topics.

> *"It was a bit hard to sort of jump in. There was a lot to be discussed I thought". Focus group participant.*

Participants in the unfocused groups felt that there were some instances they could have said more, but they didn't want to focus the discussion on themselves. It is possible that this same self-regulation happens in normal group interactions where individuals are mindful of drawing too much attention to themselves, whereas the participants in the focus groups felt that they were there to talk about themselves so had no issues doing so.

> *"I probably could have said more about what I do myself, but I thought I won't bother because I am just talking about one person." Unfocused group participant.*

However a key difference between the methods was that if an unfocused group changed the topic too soon participants would bring the conversation back to that topic so they could say what they wanted. This was not possible in focus groups, where the moderator would move the discussion to the next topic regardless of whether everyone had had their say. To a greater

degree, unfocused groups felt that they said everything they wanted to say, supporting the hypothesis that unfocused groups produce lower levels of participant frustration (H6).

4.7 Participant truthfulness

Focus groups felt they could say what they really thought because they were unlikely to ever see the other participants again. The perception was that they were anonymous, despite not knowing anything about each other (and that they all lived in the same local area so could possibly have mutual acquaintances or run into each other again).

> *"You know, the fact that you don't know anyone there ... even if they do go and say it to somebody else what chance is there of having a connection, as big as Sydney is?" Focus group participant.*

There was some reluctance for focus groups to express feelings on potentially controversial or socially sensitive topics, such as multiculturalism or racism. Participants did not want to seem racist by making any negative comments about the changing cultural mix in their local area.

Unfocused groups were relaxed in discussing a range of topics.

> *"Everything we touched on we actually felt very comfortable about." Unfocused group participant.*

> *"Absolutely yes. It's important for women to have that sense of belonging, to be able to talk freely." Unfocused group participant.*

In some cases unfocused groups discussed politically or socially sensitive topics, but participants were quite frank in their views and were comfortable giving opinions, for example on the issues of asylum seeker rights and entitlements:

> *"The government they help all these people, refugees that come here, they get everything - free dental, free doctors. We never had anything." Unfocused group participant.*

Despite unfocused groups being generally comfortable giving different opinions, some did express reluctance to discuss personally sensitive topics such as financial difficulty, as this was something perceived as embarrassing and they did not want their friends to know about. Results regarding our hypothesis about participant truthfulness (H7) are inconclusive, because both methods included instances where participants were reluctant to discuss particular (but different) types of sensitive topics.

5.   Conclusions

These findings suggest that the group discussion method may affect the nature of the first-order data obtained. Obviously, the focus group approach guarantees data on all discussion guide topics. The unfocused group approach is likely to cover fewer topics, but at greater length, and more insight is gained regarding the topics that are relevant and important for that particular group. In addition, it is likely that additional topics outside of the scope of pre-developed discussion guides would be covered. However in a practical sense, if those commissioning primary research have specific topics they would like discussed these may not be raised spontaneously by unfocused groups.

The results regarding non-verbal dynamics present some interesting considerations, for example the relatively negative tone of focus groups. This finding supports previous studies reporting that focus groups produce more angry comments, which has been attributed to the synergy of the group keeping the anger going (Geis, Fuller, & Rush, 1986) and turning the discussion into a complaint session (Franz, 2011). This could be because participants see the focus group as an opportunity to vent their frustrations to someone who is interested in hearing their views. In contrast, participants in the unfocused groups may already know the issues that annoy or frustrate each other so there is no need to revisit them during the group discussion. It could also be because focus group participants are directed to discuss topics that they may not have thought about before, and in this situation it is easier to criticise than come up with a considered opinion.

Findings were also reported on the interaction between participants in different group methods. It is generally agreed that a key strength of group-based research is the ability to harness group dynamics to prompt fuller discussion and idea generation as participants query each other and explain their own views (Morgan, 1996; Parker & Tritter, 2006). However the nature of this interaction is rarely reported (Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Kitzinger, 1994), instead group research results are usually presented as a series of interactions between individual participants and the researcher, rather than as participants interacting with each other. The present study suggests that initially, focus group interactions were relatively artificial but that this changed and became more authentic as the discussion progressed, whereas unfocused group participants were more engaged and exhibited more high energy from the very beginning. This contradicts previous studies which found stranger groups to be more energetic and dynamic (Leask et al., 2001), which could be explained by the fact that in that study, the "natural groups" were not groups of close friends but rather members of a recently formed first time mothers group. The authors acknowledged that in their study, natural group participants "were at the delicate stage of establishing group norms and wanting to fit in" (p.153) and as such were pressured by group conformity and consensus. They do however, support other studies which note that groups of people who know each other's background and circumstances are able to provide greater insights that would be less accessible in alternative settings (Peek & Fothergill, 2009).

Results regarding participant frustration and truthfulness add new knowledge in the area of group-based research. The anonymity of being with strangers enabled participants in the focus groups to speak freely about sensitive issues that they may not want to share with people they see regularly – for example experiencing financial difficulties. However, intimate topics were also raised during the unfocused groups, such as personal experiences of menopause or the physical realities of growing older (e.g. different body parts sagging) and the ways they were dealing with such changes (e.g. supportive underwear). This questions the commonly held belief in marketing research that stranger groups produce more candid and truthful contributions. Further research is required to examine whether some sensitive topics are more appropriate for strangers and others for natural groupings.

Questions are also raised regarding whether participants are more willing to share their story in front of people they do not know than people they have known for some time as suggested by Leask et al. (2001). If this is the case it could be hypothesised that they may be even more comfortable in a one on one (individual interview) situation where they can tell their story exclusively rather than share the speaking time with other group participants. This relationship between participant willingness to divulge information in relation to number of people present and whether they know them or not is an interesting avenue for future research.

One benefit of the unfocused method was that the familiarity of being amongst friends provided a degree of sense checking of participant contributions. In this case, group members actually disputed contributions of others that they knew not to be true, so participants could not say anything too removed from reality. This could not occur in focus groups because participants knew nothing about each other's lives. Consequently, some contradictions were observed between participant statements at the start of the discussion and towards the end when they felt more relaxed.

Findings present considerations for the design of both commercial and academic qualitative research. Given that the methods produce different data, researchers should challenge the default preference for directed, non-affinity groups when proposing a group-based research design, supporting previous appeals for researchers not to blindly accept the "rules of thumb" regarding group-based research (Morgan, 1996, p.141). Techniques present different strengths and weaknesses, and researchers should carefully consider the research questions and sample before making judgements about which is most appropriate. It is advisable to be mindful of the impact of the social and physical environment on the group dynamics and be open to handing some control over the direction and process to research participants. In essence, be an active listener rather than active moderator.

Practically, given the non-directedness of unfocused groups more discussions may be required to ensure all relevant topics are covered. The focus group approach also has advantages from the commissioning organisation's perspective: it allows them to view groups behind one-way mirrors, avoids them having to travel to participant's homes and allows them to test their own hypotheses with the target audience – either by adding their own questions into the discussion guide or having notes delivered to the moderator during the discussion.

It is acknowledged that not all parts of the world have a default technique which dominates group-based research; such is the case in Australia where this research was conducted. However, the findings presented in this paper are relevant for researchers regardless of the situation regarding group-based research in their particular country because they work towards building an empirical knowledge base that can inform methodological decision making. In the case where a range of different methods are more commonly used (as is the case, for example, in many European countries) this research helps inform such decisions. In the case where a default method tends to be used (such as Australia or the US) it prompts researchers to consider alternative techniques and understand the impact of different methodological decisions. Rather than attempting to establish the superiority of one method over another the present study aims to add to the tool box available to qualitative researchers such that they can make appropriate methodological decisions for their particular research question.

A limitation of this study is that it does not permit conclusions to be drawn about which specific aspect of each method might be contributing to the differences, for example, whether the degree of affinity between group participants, the degree of directedness or the natural environment causes the differences identified. Future research which permits modification of just one aspect of the design (e.g. participant affinity, group directedness, physical environment and so on) would allow conclusions to be drawn regarding the effect of changes in that particular aspect. For example, reducing the number of topics included in the discussion guide may give the group longer to talk about each topic and have implications for the length and depth with which they discuss each one.

In addition, this study compares two quite divergent methods: an explicit, sequential, detailed discussion guide with a set timeframes and an active moderator versus a virtually non-moderated method. Whilst the former method is widely used and the one most commonly

prescribed by research text books, it should be acknowledged that not all focus groups involve such structured procedures. Many groups fall somewhere in between and may, for example, elicit and then follow-up topics from the group participants or introduce topics that arise in early groups into later groups.

It should also be noted that the content topic chosen for this comparison was inherently interesting to the individuals involved: they were asked to talk about themselves. It could be hypothesised that if differences are found between the methods with this topic (in terms of information generated, level of enjoyment etc.), then it is even more likely that differences would be present on less personally interesting topics where groups might need more assistance for the discussion to be maintained.

It could be argued that the research question chosen for investigation in this study was exploratory in nature and is therefore more suited to a naturalistic and unstructured method (Mattinson & Baskin, 2012). According to Calder (1977), the fact that the objectives of this research are to understand the perspective and experience of a particular group within society suggests that it is more suited to a phenomenological qualitative methodology which produces "everyday knowledge" (p.355), such as the unfocused group discussion technique. Calder's view serves to further highlight the problem of researchers tending to default to one research method without careful consideration of the implications of using one qualitative technique over another. Having not conducted a similar methods comparison with a range of different research questions or objectives there is currently little empirical evidence to support this view; however it would be valuable as an avenue for future research.

We should also acknowledge that the researchers in this study are also the authors of this paper, which may raise the question of potential bias being introduced by the researchers who are aware of the aims of this study. Having said this, the three researchers have different methodological backgrounds relating to qualitative research and between them have experience conducting both methods compared here in commercial and academic contexts. The consultative process of comparative analysis which involved all three researchers is likely to have gone some way to minimising any such bias.

This empirical evidence demonstrating that different methods produce data which is different in a number of respects leads to multiple other questions to be addressed with future research. For example, are different methods of group-based research more appropriate for particular types of sensitive topics (e.g. personal health problems versus issues of politically correctness)?; for different socio-demographic groups (e.g. would men in their early twenties or working mothers in their forties be more suited to a particular method)?; or for different types of research questions (e.g. social/political issues versus commercial product or advertising testing). There is a need to answer these questions with empirical evidence in order to provide researchers with tools to inform the design of higher quality research projects.

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Appendix 1: Focus groups discussion guide

Note: The topics listed below and the times shown in brackets against each are guides/checklists to ensure that all relevant areas are covered. The sequence in which the topics will be covered in the discussion will be dictated by how each focus group flows. Probes will not be read verbatim, but demonstrate the likely areas of inquiry within each broad subject area.

1.   Introduction and Participant Warm-up (15 minutes)

This section will provide a framework for the focus group by outlining the topic area, establishing group norms and allowing participants to settle prior to the main discussion.

- Moderator welcome and introduction
- Overview of group norms – only one person speaking at a time, no right/wrong answers, don't have to disagree, each person's opinion important, etc.
- Advise participants about recording and viewing, refreshments, confidentiality, etc.
- Introduce topic - interested in understanding what it's like to be a mid-60 year old woman in Australia today
- Participant Warm-up - Introduce yourself; your first name, mention a little about yourself and your household, what fills your day, anything you're happy to share to help us get to know each other

2.   General Lifestyle (10 minutes)

This section will invite spontaneous discussion of key issues in the women's lives to provide a context for the targeted topics to follow.

- Tonight I'd like to start by asking how you feel about being a woman in her 60s in contemporary Australia?
- How would you describe your lifestyle currently?
- What particular things bring you joy?
- And what are your main challenges in life now?

3.   Familial relationships (10 minutes)

This section will explore participants' relationships with their partners, and immediate family members.

- For those of you with husbands/partners, tell me a little about your relationship with them at the moment – the good and not so good elements?

- What sort of relationships do you have with your immediate family members?

- How do you describe your role within the broader family (probe: childcare provider, parental carer, financial support giver, emotional support giver)?

- How do you feel about this role?

- How has this changed, if at all, in recent years?

4. Housing (10 minutes)

This section will examine current accommodation and it's suitability for existing lifestyles.

- What sort of housing do you live in at the moment?

- To what extent does your current housing fit your lifestyle (probe: positives and negatives)?

- What changes, if any, would you like to make now or in the next few years (probe: downsizing, re-location, retirement communities)?

- What will motivate these changes?

5. Work and civic life (10 minutes)

This section will provide an understanding of the role of both paid and unpaid work.

- For those of you in paid work outside the house, how do you feel about your choice to work and the type of work you do?

- For those of you who are engaged in unpaid or volunteer work outside the home, how do you feel about your role?

- What was your main reason for choosing these roles?

- How satisfied are you with the jobs/roles you have?

- What changes, if any, would you like to make?

6. Health and wellbeing (10 minutes)

This section will explore attitudes towards physical and mental health.

- How would you describe your health at the moment?

- What aspects of health are important to you?

- What strategies or activities do you have to remain healthy?

- And how do you view mental health compared with physical health?

- What are your expectations in terms of your general health and wellness in the near future?

7.   Leisure and entertainment (10 minutes)

This section will identify a range of leisure activities and motivations for pursuing them.

- What do you like to do in your leisure time?

- What hobbies or activities – big or small - do you currently have?

- To what extent, if at all, does travel feature in your life?

- What draws you to these activities?

8.   A comparison with previous and future generations (15 minutes)

In this section comparisons will be made between participant's current lifestyles and those of the previous and rising generation of 60-something year old Australian women.

- How does your situation and lifestyle compare with your mother's experience at a similar age?

- What do you see as the similarities between her experience and yours?

- And where are the differences?

- In your view, why do you think these differences have occurred?

- In a similar vein, how do you feel your daughters' (for those of you who have them) or their peers' lives will be when they are in their sixties?

- What might be common to your current experience?

- And what might be different?

- In your opinion, what will have shaped such changes?

9.   Close and thanks

We're coming to the end of our time together tonight

- Are there any final comments you would like to offer before we finish our discussion?

Thank participants, collect signatures and distribute incentives.

Appendix 2: Topic introduction for unfocussed groups

My name is _____ and I'm working on a research project among Australian women, trying to find out how you're feeling about this particular stage of your life. Simple as that.

When we conduct this kind of research, it's all very relaxed and open-ended. Instead of knocking on your door or ringing up and asking you questions, we like to assemble small groups of people like yourselves – not to answer any questions at all, but simply to chat about the subject we're interested in. So that's what's going to happen: I'll explain what we're trying to find out and then I'll leave it to you to say whatever you'd like to say about that subject.

It's going to be very informal. There are no rules. I'm not in charge – I'm just going to sit here and listen and take a few notes. I'll record the discussion as well – just so we don't miss any of the things you're saying. Is that OK with everybody? The comments you make will be combined with comments made by other women in groups like this that we're conducting in various parts of Sydney, and those comments will form the basis of our report on this particular project. Of course, your comments will be completely anonymous – we never use people's names in our reports, and we don't even need to know what your names are.

Thank you for giving up your time this evening – obviously, this kind of research depends on people like you being prepared to give us your time and your opinions. So thank you.

Okay then let's get started. The project we're working on at the moment is about as general as it could be. We simply want to know what it feels like to be a woman in Sydney in her mid-sixties. In other words, what it feels like to be you. We're interested in anything at all you might like to say about the way your life is at the moment. It's entirely up to you what you'd like to say … how you'd like to tackle the subject. There are no right or wrong answers – we'd just like to hear about **what it's like to be you.**

Okay … over to you … leave me right out of it. I'm just here to listen. So … if one of you would like to start, let's just see how the conversation goes from there …

Tables

Table 1: Differences between group-based research methods

	Focus Groups	Unfocused Groups
Group participants	Strangers	Real (existing) social groups
Group location	Central location	Natural group habitat
Moderator's role	Active	Passive
Discussion format	Specified by topic outline	None, other than introducing the topic
Time	Limit set	No set limit
Recording	Video and audio recording	None, or audio recording only

Figures

Figure 1: Graphical representation of group discussions

	Discussion topic	Focus groups			Unfocused groups		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
General lifestyle	Psychological/feelings						
	Finance/money						
	Technology						
	The world today						
	Current affairs/social issues						
Relationships & friendships	Spouse						
	Single						
	Children						
	Parents						
	Grandchildren						
	Friends						
	Pets						
	Dysfunctional families						
Housing	Staying/happy						
	Downsizing/looking to change						
	Family staying/living with them						
	General description						
Work & civic life	Paid work						
	Looking for paid work						
	Unpaid work/volunteering						
	Home duties						
	Not working/retired						
Health & wellbeing	Physical health						
	Mental health						
	Menopause						
	Ageing						
	People they know sick/dead/going through trauma						
	Medical facilities/health system						
Leisure & entertainment	Social						
	Travel						
	Physical – sports/dancing/gardening etc.						
	Non-physical – reading/TV/puzzles/relaxing etc.						
	Technology						
	Arts						
	Lack of time for leisure activities						
	Other						
Previous generation	Had it better than us						
	Had it worse than us						
	Different lifestyle						
Next generation	Got it better than us						
	Negative qualities						
	Different lifestyle						
	Nice/positive things to say						
Reminiscing	Things were different then						
	Story telling						
Future	Getting older						
	Don't think about it/live for today						
	Wondering/worrying about future						
	Future housing – nursing home/live with family etc.						
	Wills/dying						

Key:

Shading	Seconds	Minutes (approx.)
	0	0
	1-120	0-2
	121-300	2-5
	>300	>5