REVIEW ESSAY


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Focus groups can be used to gather data for primary analysis or to identify areas of need as a preliminary step in research design. Rosaline Barbour’s *Doing Focus Groups* should be of interest to those considering the use of focus groups for their action research. This book is one of the eight-volume SAGE Qualitative Research Kit series edited by Uwe Flick, professor of qualitative research in social science and education at the Free University of Berlin. It has eleven chapters and includes a glossary, reference list, author index, and subject index. The book begins with broader conceptual topics (Chapter One is called “Introducing Focus Groups”) and grows more practical in later chapters, which are arranged in the order by which a research project would tend to unfold. The chapters are organized similarly. Each begins with an internal table of contents and a list of learning objectives. At the end of each chapter is a list of key ideas and supplementary readings relevant to that chapter. The book contains a generous number of illustrative examples from published research—often the Barbour’s own work in health research—to help elucidate chapter contents.

In some ways the book is an apology for its own topic, which, as the book often mentions, some people associate with marketing projects in the private sector. Its generous inclusion of existing focus group research is welcome for those seeking assurances that this form of data gathering is in good standing in the social sciences. In keeping with its function as part of a series about qualitative research, the book takes pains to foreground the differences between quantitative and qualitative research. Barbour notes, for example, that qualitative research is not necessarily interested in gaining a view of the average attitude towards a topic (what market researchers want to know), but rather may value the identification of “outliers” (p. 58) so as to account for the variety of opinions and needs
within the constituency under consideration. While much of the book serves as a literature review on the subject of focus group research from conceptualization to completion, Barbour also gives insights derived from her experience as a consultant and as professor of health care at the Open University. Some advice is practical and specific: on the appropriateness of bringing refreshments to a focus group, Barbour comments, “It would be highly insensitive to offer food and drink to practicing Muslims during Ramadan, for example” (p. 75).

Even though the book is organized as an introductory textbook might be, newcomers to social science research or to the use of focus groups may require patience towards the book’s eventual divulgence of its contents. Key terms, for example, may get mentioned but discussed as though its meaning is obvious (as with the term “sampling frame” [p.61]). As it turns out, the glossary contains good definitions of these key terms: bold-facing terms in the body of the text as an indicator of their presence in the glossary would have been helpful. In this relatively short book, some topics are not discussed in detail. Someone wanting to know how to do conversation analysis on focus group transcripts, for example, will not get specific instructions; instead, as is always the case for such specifics, the book directs readers to other resources (p. 79). Nevertheless, by the book’s final chapter, “Realizing the full potential of focus groups,” Barbour addresses, generally if not in detail, all the material the book promises to cover.

This book lacks the comprehensiveness of a longer text, but those seeking an overview of issues relating to focus groups in social science research should find Doing Focus Groups a good place to start. ■