Focus Groups as a Tool for Policy Analysis

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Focus groups were formerly associated with market research but have recently gained some measure of social scientific respectability. In this article, I briefly recapitulate the history of focus groups and then examine their role in 4 (2 Dutch, 2 American) policy research projects. In each case, the focus groups provided an understanding of the interests and values of different stakeholder groups and permitted the analysts to predict the groups’ reactions to policy alternatives. This served to link the focus groups to the underlying policy problem, to set the policy issues in their appropriate context, to take due account of the technical complexities of the situation, and to orient toward integrating the results of the focus groups with the other tools used in the policy analysis. The four cases shared a “spiral” model approach to focus groups, in which the discussion moves from generic to specific toward the object of focus rather than tackling it directly. This permits both a breadth and depth of perspective and helps avoid posturing. I conclude that focus groups provide a value for policy analysis because they enable participant stakeholders to become part of the process, help uncover misunderstandings that conceal underlying agreements among stakeholders, and uncover potential problems of implementation.

For many, perhaps most, public policy decisions, there are a number of stakeholders with differing values. A number of tools are available to the policy analyst to obtain and understand these values and how they will affect the formulation and implementation of policy options. Increasingly, “focus groups” are becoming part of the standard tool kit, alongside other tools such as surveys, elite interviews, and quantitative opinion measurement, as policy analysts seek to merge public and other stakeholder values with the economic and technological analyses that lead to policy recommendations (Keeney, von Winterfeldt, & Eppel, 1990; Weimer, 1995). In this article, I will identify the hallmark characteristics of focus groups...
employed in policy analysis, tracing the development of the tool through case studies of four recent policy analyses conducted at RAND.

What Is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion whose objective is to learn about the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of the group participating in the discussion with respect to a defined area of interest (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Cohen, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997; United Kingdom National Audit Office, 1997). The group is typically small (6–15 people), and the discussion typically lasts between 90 and 120 min. It is important that the environment in which a focus group is conducted be nonthreatening, permissive, and informal. The identifying characteristic of a focus group is the interaction among the participants as the discussion follows the general outline structured by the moderator; it is neither a group structured interview, nor participant observation, nor a debate.

There is virtually unanimous consensus on a number of methodological features of focus groups. The group should be relatively homogeneous with respect to the topic of interest, because the objective is to highlight where agreement exists within the group. It is sometimes considered desirable to have the group homogeneous with respect to age, sex, socioeconomic status, and other factors that might influence attitudes toward the topic target. Generally, subject recruitment should be tailored, in terms of demographics and shared viewpoints, to the research aims (Basch, 1987; Brown, Long, & Weitz, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994). The group leader takes the role of moderator, guiding the group toward the issues of ultimate interest to the analyst. He or she is responsible for facilitating interaction, interjecting probing comments, offering transitional questions and summaries (without interfering with flow), and covering important topics and questions in a prepared outline. All the while the moderator must be free to modify the prepared outline when necessary, in order to maintain a positive climate. The requirements of this task indicate that the moderator should be an experienced group leader, not a subject matter expert for the topic of interest (Langer, 2001; Morgan, 1997). The protocol guiding the discussion is the means of focusing the group. It must cover the topic from all relevant aspects and must be prepared carefully and pretested.

Focus groups have been in use for over 50 years. The earliest use was by Robert K. Merton and his colleagues in the early part of World War II to test responses to a program of radio broadcasts designed to maintain domestic morale in support of the war (Merton, 1987; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). After the war, focus groups became largely the province of market research and were used to test the

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1 In addition to the textbooks and topic-oriented articles cited here, SAGE Publications has an extensive library of theoretical and practical volumes on focus groups. Other publishers have also entered the market with books for the would-be practitioner.
public’s reactions to potential new products, new advertising campaigns, or—increasingly—political campaigns (Basch, 1987; Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstucker, 1976; Calder, 1977; Desvousges & Smith, 1988; Higgenbotham & Cox, 1979; Lederman, 1990). Focus groups are still used by marketers, with increasing sophistication and incorporation of computer-assisted technology (Javidi, Long, Vasu, & Ivy, 1991; Walston & Lissitz, 2000).

During the 40 years following World War II, there was little social scientific research use of focus groups; indeed, they were looked down upon as the province of commercial interests. What use was made of focus groups was as an adjunct method to more mainstream research tools such as surveys, in order to orient to a new field, design survey questionnaires, generate research hypotheses, or explicate puzzling findings (Morgan, 1997). Since the mid-1980s, however, focus groups have once again become an accepted method for social scientific research. Hugentobler (1991) views the social sciences as preparing to reclaim focus groups as a research tool, and Slocombe (1992) reviewed “how to” texts for general social scientific researchers. Ward, Bertrand, and Brown (1991) directly compared focus groups and surveys in three studies and found that the two methods provide consistent results.

Thus, focus groups are now finding increasing use in social research, particularly in issues regarding public perception in policy formulation. These include research centering on valuation (e.g., Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Desvousges & Smith, 1988; Kaplowitz & Hoehn, 2001; Kirby, 1994; Swenson, Griswold, & Kleiber, 1992; United Kingdom National Audit Office, 2001) and research centering on education, especially in health (e.g., Basch, 1987; Bass et al., 1999; Cynamon & Kulka, 1999; Lederman, 1990; Schattner, Shmerling, & Murphy, 1991; Yach, 1992).

Desvousges and Smith (1988, p. 479) highlight the modern view of focus groups in detailing their advantages in studying risk communication:

Focus groups can also make risk communication more effective by helping communicators listen to “consumers” of risk messages. Too often, risk communicators are more concerned with educating the public, rather than first listening to them and then developing communication policies. Focus groups allow the consumers of risk messages or communication programs to provide critiques and feedback to their designers. Using feedback from focus groups, researchers can gain qualitative insights on how people perceive risk, as well as evaluations of the perceptual or cognitive effects of the risk information format. Such feedback is crucial to communicating risks more effectively.

The contemporary view is that focus groups provide a major tool for qualitative analysis, either self-contained or in conjunction with other tools. Morgan (1997) sees the interactive quality of focus groups as a source of data and insights that would be difficult to obtain from other methods. Basch (1987) claims that focus groups provide an easy way to learn about ideas and opinions, especially on sensitive topics.
This is not to say that focus groups are a panacea. Basch (1987) cautions that focus groups are not useful for traditional hypothesis testing or drawing inferences (especially quantitative parameters) from large populations. Bers (1989) sees focus groups as useful only if the focus is narrow. Thus, focus groups in contemporary research are both an art and a science. They are an art to the extent that science is identified as precision and replicability of data collection. But they are a science to the extent that the protocol guides the session and that rules specify how the session will be conducted.

Four Case Studies

The RAND Corporation is increasingly using focus groups in conjunction with other methods as part of extensive policy analyses. Four examples of this type of research are presented here. Although these four studies have little substantive similarity, the common use of focus groups makes a comparison among them interesting. The four studies are of strengthening river dikes in the Netherlands, policy regarding gays in the U.S. military, training quality assurance in blood banking, and the safety of Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam.

The four case studies, although addressing very different substantive issues, have a number of features in common. All were highly politically charged, involving powerful stakeholder groups and heavy media coverage. The research sponsor in each case required results in a very short time and in the form of explicit policy recommendations, not just abstract results. This resulted in research efforts that were large, multidisciplinary, and outcome-oriented. Although the time span for conducting the research was short, the closeness of the public eye demanded that the effort be rigorous—we had to be “quick,” but being “dirty” could be fatal!

River Dike Strengthening in the Netherlands

The Dutch government is perpetually faced with the problem of flood protection. Although sea dikes such as the enclosing dike that transformed the Zuider Zee into the IJsselmeer and the Oosterschelde storm surge barrier are better known, the Dutch also have an extensive system of river dikes to protect the land from river overflows. Much of the Netherlands is Rhine and Maas delta land, and much of that land, in turn, is below the level of the rivers. This land is protected from floods by “dike rings” that enclose the land. (In the Dutch view, “inside the dike” is the land area to be protected, whereas “outside the dike” is the waterway.)

The policy problem for the Dutch ministry of traffic and waterways is how high to build the river dikes. This is phrased in terms of “security levels” protecting against a water level likely only once in \( n \) years. (For example, if \( n = 500 \), then the dike is constructed to protect against flood conditions that could be expected about once every 500 years.) This security level is only a statistical average; this century, floods exceeding a security level of \( n = 100 \) have occurred in 1926, 1994, and 1995.
The greater the value of \( n \), the higher and stronger the dikes must be, but the relationship is not at all linear. Building taller and stronger dikes costs more, not only in terms of design, construction, and maintenance financial costs, but also in terms of damage to the surrounding environment. The policy problem is how to balance the total costs against the benefits of lives and property saved by preventing the river from overflowing inside the dike ring.

The problem became politically important when environmental groups in the Netherlands protested against plans for dike strengthening on the grounds that the plans would cause great harm to the environment. The political debate became so strong that the minister commissioned a study to determine whether the previously established security level of \( n = 1,250 \) was too conservative. Because of the political relevance, the study was to be completed in time for a report to the Dutch parliament within 6 months of its being commissioned.

To answer the minister’s question, RAND and the Delft Hydrological Laboratory conducted a policy analysis (author-related citation). The study group conducted hydrological analyses to determine what size and strength of dike was needed to obtain given security levels; engineering analyses to determine the feasibility and costs of designing, constructing, and maintaining dikes of differing security levels and degrees of preservation of the environment; and economic analyses to determine the costs of flooding various dike rings alongside the Rhine and Maas Rivers.

In conjunction with these “objective” analyses, the study group conducted five focus groups to explore the opinions of different stakeholder groups. The focus groups, each with between 10 and 16 participants, were drawn from

- Environmental activists, such as the Red Ons Rivieren [Save Our Rivers] group
- Environmental advocates (but not activists) such as the Stichting Natuur en Milieu [Nature Conservancy]
- The elected Waterschappen [water boards], or local governmental agencies charged with flood protection (these are among the oldest governmental organizations in the Netherlands)
- People who live along the dikes and are therefore most affected by the risks of floods and the damage of dike construction
- People who live in cities, who are only indirectly affected but who pay the taxes for the dikes

Members of each of these constituencies were recruited for separate focus groups that examined their ecological values and concerns about flooding and their views for the appropriate procedures for making decisions regarding the dikes.

The groups revealed, to the surprise of the actors in the political debate, a remarkable similarity of perspective. All five focus groups generally viewed landscape and ecological values in terms of the impact on the environment as a whole.
They viewed the integrity of the constantly varying ecosystem as the most important criterion; environmental impact could not be assessed on the basis of individual components such as houses, trees, slopes, and vegetation. Cultural values were expressed in terms of the preservation of natural heritage and recreation. The river landscape, as immortalized by 17th-century Dutch “Golden Age” painters such as Jacob van Ruysdael, has become an important part of Dutch cultural history. In addition, the river environment has become an important locus of recreational activities. For example, bicycling along the dikes and canoe tripping are major recreational activities enhanced by the natural beauty and cultural history of the area.

The political benefits from conducting the focus groups were probably as important as the specific information about values that the groups provided. Participants in all groups strongly believed that all points of view should be heard in the process of deciding what types of dikes should be built, where, and when. All values, strategies, and arguments presented should receive honest answers. The focus groups provided a forum for this participation and permitted the spectrum of different constituencies to have a voice in the process. This greatly aided the acceptance of the research findings.

**Gays in the Military**

U.S. President William Clinton’s first major crisis, which came about in his first month in office, revolved around a campaign promise to remove barriers to gays’ openly serving in the U.S. military forces. The military establishment was strongly and vocally opposed to this change. Clinton called on the Secretary of Defense to report by the middle of the following July on whether it was possible to remove the restrictions on gays in the military while still maintaining military capability and the cohesion of the armed forces. In the following months, there was intense activity by partisan groups on all sides. Congressional committees in both the House and Senate held hearings, public surveys were taken by major polling organizations, and “experts” on the subject regularly appeared on television news and talk shows. In March 1993, the Secretary of Defense requested that the National Defense Research Institute at RAND conduct a comprehensive study on the question, in parallel with an effort conducted under the auspices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The study had to be completed by mid-June in order for the Secretary to respond to the President’s deadline of mid-July.

RAND’s (author-related citation) study was a multidisciplinary examination of as many of the sides of the issue as was possible. More than 25 professionals worked full-time on the project for the 3 months of its existence. In this study, we

- Reviewed the history of gays in the U.S. military
- Reviewed the history of the integration of racial minorities and women into the U.S. military
Examined how the military forces of other countries handled the issue
Examined how police and fire departments in major American cities handled the issue
Estimated the risks of AIDS and other diseases incurred by changes in the military policy toward gays
Reviewed the literature on the effects of social cohesion on unit performance
Analyzed public opinion polls
Conducted focus groups of U.S. military enlisted personnel and officers serving both in the United States and abroad

Eighteen focus groups were assembled at Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps bases in the United States and Europe. Separate groups were conducted for commissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted personnel. We asked that focus group members be randomly selected from the units chosen; this request was strictly honored at some sites and not at all honored at other sites. All groups, however, had members who varied with respect to gender, race, and service occupation.

The groups followed a protocol designed to lead gradually into the topic of homosexuals in the military, in order to understand that issue in the larger context of military life. Therefore, we began by asking participants to comment on their living and working conditions, focusing on rules and expectations for behavior, how well people got along, reasons for conflicts that arose, and how conflicts were resolved. Focus group leaders probed for the roles leadership played in resolving conflicts. They then turned to a consideration of what factors led to effective performance in work groups and how cohesion was fostered in work groups, probing to explore how important it was to like and socialize with coworkers. Differences in race and gender were explored as potential threats to performance and social cohesion. Finally, the topic of gays in the military was introduced with reference to the proposed removal of the ban, and reaction was elicited in light of the previous discussion. Although all participants knew of the purpose of the focus groups, only occasionally did the participants “jump the gun” to begin talking about this topic before the moderator introduced it. Finally, the groups were asked what advice they would give military leaders in the event that open homosexuals were allowed to serve.

The outcomes of the focus groups were highly variable, with marked differences depending on military service and participants’ rank. In some groups, the topic provoked a very strong antigay reaction, whereas in others, the discussion did not increase markedly in intensity. Although a substantial proportion of the focus groups reported antigay reactions, it appears that the more the request to select participants randomly was honored, the milder was the reaction. The strongest homophobic reaction was in one group recruited by the military base leadership to “tell those RAND folks what we think about gays.”
participants were strongly against lifting the ban, that viewpoint had nowhere near the unanimity that some sources had claimed. Few participants were comfortable with the idea of open homosexuals serving in the armed forces, but most believed that the military would in time adapt, just as it had with other changes imposed from outside. This last reaction was an important contributor to RAND’s recommended policy that a homosexual orientation should be neither a bar to service nor a protected class of service personnel, but that sexual orientation should instead be considered not germane to military service.\textsuperscript{3}

\textit{Training Quality Assurance in Blood Banking}

With the advent of HIV, new strains of hepatitis, and the prevalence of other blood-borne pathogens, the need for strict quality control of the blood supply has become of paramount importance. In earlier times, blood banking was a community activity largely in the hands of volunteers, but modern demands require organizations that can achieve pharmaceutical standards of production rigor. This means that there is a need for central control of blood banking systems, including quality assurance methods that cross community organizational boundaries, and a set of (inter)national standards such that blood transferred from one location to another can be depended upon to meet the standards of the receiving location. Blood banking organizations in the United States have been under pressure from the Food and Drug Administration and the courts to ensure that they are meeting these new standards, and have been in consequence restructuring their organizations.

RAND, together with a number of other research groups, undertook an examination of a major blood banking organizational structure. That comprehensive study included

- Reviewing information systems used to track the blood supply
- Assessing organizational structures and management practices
- Analyzing patterns of regulatory citations
- Interviewing all levels of personnel at a number of blood banking organizations
- Assessing the writing and training of standard operating procedures in laboratories and donor facilities
- Focus groups of testing laboratory line and training personnel

The focus groups convened as part of this study were oriented toward how the standard operating procedures that were promulgated were designed and

\textsuperscript{3} Although the American government instead chose to attempt a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that of this writing is showing signs of collapse, the United Kingdom, faced with the same problem in 1999, essentially adopted the RAND recommendations.
implemented. Separate groups were conducted at eight blood banking and blood testing sites of teaching staff—whose responsibility was to ensure that line staff understood and complied with the procedures—and the line technical staff themselves. In addition, two groups were conducted at the organization’s national headquarters with the staff responsible for writing regulations and procedural manuals. A total of 18 focus groups were conducted, each with between 8 and 14 participants. The focus groups began with a general discussion of what it was like to work at the blood bank site, probing for general likes and dislikes in the beginning and later for how it felt to work in a highly regulated environment. We then discussed the training that staff get as they begin work, probing for its adequacy, duration, and overall quality. From there, we moved to a discussion of retraining, how training was used as a remedy for substandard performance, and how new operating procedures were introduced into the workplace. For trainers, we asked how they had become trainers, what economic and other recognition they received, and the status accorded trainers at the site. We ended the sessions by asking how the participants would rate management’s relative concern with production schedules, training, and quality assurance.

The focus groups showed that both trainers and line staff were confused by the turmoil surrounding attempted organizational reforms. New regulations, revisions to new regulations, and new training packages all were jumbled in the minds of the trainers and staff, causing uncertainty about what was demanded of them. This in turn engendered mistrust of the national organization, which further undermined the need for the blood banking industry to be centrally controlled. The groups conducted at the national headquarters, on the other hand, revealed frustration at not having their regulations and procedures understood and implemented at the local level. They, in their turn, mistrusted the local trainers and administrators. Although in an objective sense some blood banks were working well and others were greatly in need of improvement, all cherished their autonomy and believed that centralization would create difficulties. No matter how well local units were performing, the deep mutual distrust between central and peripheral organizational units dominated the environment. RAND used the information gained from the focus groups to recommend a series of intensive workshops among participants at different places in the organization in order to arrive at a common vision of the company and an understanding of the problems and perspectives of each of the groups of actors.

The Safety of Schiphol Airport

RAND’s examination of the safety of the Schiphol, the Dutch national airport, located just outside of Amsterdam, was a follow-on to an earlier assessment of the airport (author-related citation), originally made in response to the crash of a Boeing 747 freight airplane into an apartment complex near Schiphol on October 4, 1992. The earlier study, which included focus groups, made a number of
recommendations for safety improvement, organizational change, and communication policy at the airport. The second study (author-related citation) took place during a time when the expansion or replacement of Schiphol was a hotly debated topic in the Netherlands and shortly after a parliamentary enquiry into the 1992 accident. The study, designed as a replication of the 1993 RAND safety audit, was conducted by DuPont Safety Systems and RAND Europe and consisted of a safety audit of the airport (examining the current state of each of the airport safety systems with respect to objectives established following the first study) and examination in focus groups of the public perception of safety, quite apart from any “objective” assessment of safety.

Eight focus groups were convened, five in communities near the major flight paths in and out of Schiphol, two in communities around smaller airports in the Netherlands, and one in a region in the center of the country well-distanced from any airport. Each group had between 9 and 17 participants.

The focus groups began with a general discussion of the positive and negative aspects of living in the community and then turned to a discussion of what was considered unsafe. This was then further concentrated in a discussion of risks that could not be affected by a person’s behavior because they were either not controllable (e.g., natural disasters) or involved control by others (e.g., fixed-site or transportation disasters). Thereafter, the importance of these risks, the extent to which they occupied people’s minds, and the acceptability of the risks (considering the benefits arising from willingness to take the risks) were explored. The groups discussed what their criteria and standards were for adequate external safety and what social decision-making procedures should be used in determining, implementing, and enforcing those standards. Finally, participants filled out a structured questionnaire that attempted to place aviation risk among a set of different risks in the individuals’ “worry budgets” and to assess the acceptability of all of the different risks.

The eight groups were largely the same in terms of their beliefs about safety of aviation. Fear of airplane crashes was not high on the worry budget of any of the groups, no matter where they lived; instead traffic accidents and street crime topped their lists. The level of risk from aviation at the time was deemed acceptable, but increases in that risk, especially coming from increased air traffic and new runways, might not be. All groups believed that governmental authorities had not been as forthcoming as they should have been with information about the 1992 disaster and about the proposed alternative plans to increase Dutch airport capacity.

**Methodological Guidelines for Policy Analysis Focus Groups**

The four cases presented above have a number of methodological commonalities that emerged as the studies were designed. These commonalities all serve to link the focus groups to the underlying policy problem, to set the policy issues in their appropriate context, to take due account of the technical complexities of the
situation, and to orient toward integrating the results of the focus groups with the other tools used in the policy analysis. We present these commonalities here in the form of guidelines for designing policy analysis focus groups—principles that have proven useful in the crucible of experience.

*Achieve Both Breadth and Depth of Perspective*

Policy analysis groups seek to explore both the depth and breadth of policy issues, but this is difficult to achieve in a single group. Groups composed of diverse constituencies might polarize and reduce the discussion to sloganeering, whereas homogeneous groups will provide only one side of the issue. But as discussed above, homogeneity is an important quality of focus groups for facilitating the integrative interactions required. The resolution of this dilemma involves conducting multiple homogeneous groups. Therefore, each individual group was assembled to be homogeneous with respect to the stakes held and relative status.4

The different groups within each study were composed so that all parties had an interest in the issue at hand, but from different points of view. For example, we conducted separate groups for the environmental activists and water boards in the river dike project. We also conducted separate groups when there were clear separations of relative status to avoid possible inhibitions to open discussion. Therefore, separate military groups were conducted for different ranks and the trainers and line staff were separated in the blood-banking groups. Across groups, the use of a common protocol enabled direct comparisons of stakeholder views on issues without the strategic positioning taken in debating.

In choosing stakeholder classes for groups, we were careful to include the viewpoints of a certain class of stakeholder, namely, the collective interest group, which often has no formal role in the decision-making process and sometimes even lacks an organized voice in the policy discussion process but whose stakes are nonetheless crucial to the eventual success of any policy. Examples of such groups for the four case studies respectively included the town dwellers who did not belong to any river dike interest group, the noncommissioned officers, the technical line staff in blood banks, and the people who did not live near any airport.

Given this separation, it is interesting to note that there were more commonalities than differences of opinion among the different groups within each study. For example, there was more agreement between the environmental activist and water board groups in the river dike study than members of either group would have predicted. The intensity of their disagreements over tactics and strategies prevented them from being able to realize that they shared many common underlying

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4 Although the homogeneity of focus groups has long been a tenet of market research groups, that homogeneity typically refers to demographic characteristics or potential interest in the product under investigation. Here, we require instead homogeneity of policy stakes.
principles. It is possible that extended negotiations such as described by Fisher and Ury (1981) or Raiffa (1982) might have eventually led the groups to this realization, but time precluded such efforts.

Take Care in Recruiting the Participants

The selection of participants in the focus groups is a very important consideration for policy-oriented groups and goes beyond simply requiring homogeneity. Most marketing-oriented focus group providers have a database of participants. Enrollees in this database are eligible to participate in groups for which they meet the screening criteria, with an interval of perhaps 6 months between sessions. These participants are paid, experienced focus group attendees, who are readily accessible.

Recruitment for policy focus groups is a different matter. When the sources of the groups are relatively well-identified, as in the blood banking, gays in the military, and river dike studies, the organizations themselves can be contacted and asked to provide a list of potential participants, who may then be contacted by the research team. This worked very well in the river dike and blood bank studies, and—as noted—with mixed results in the gays in the military study. For the airport safety study (and other focus group studies we have conducted with more general populations), we are increasingly coming to rely on recruiting what in the anthropological world used to be called “informants.” These are people who by the nature of their job or social position are well-informed about the attitudes of members of the community and can reflect on general community opinions as well as their own. Village council members, teachers, ministers, high school students, elected officeholders, family doctors, and recreational leaders are examples. Although such participants are expressly told to provide their own views, they are also encouraged to mention how these views compare to the more general views found in the community.

Spiral the Discussion Toward the Object of Focus

For policy-oriented focus groups, it is best not to begin directly with the main policy issue, even if that issue is highly prominent and salient. To begin with the main topic invites posturing on the part of the participants and might put them in a position in which it is uncomfortable to reconsider. Instead, the strategy we have adopted is to begin with general considerations and gradually spiral in on the main topic. This maintains an even temperament within the group, avoids “sound bite” responses, and—most importantly—gets the group to consider the main topic in the context of the world surrounding it.

Each of the case studies provides an example of this spiraling-in technique. For the river dike studies, we began by asking participants about how the river
landscape fit in with their image of the country, how important it was, how much they thought about it, and in what ways they enjoyed the landscape. We then turned to considerations of what made the landscape enjoyable. After this discussion, we moved on to questions of safety and the need for dikes to protect the land. Only when both topics had been discussed could we turn to the main topic of how to reconcile environmental preservation and safety. Our lesson in this case study came the hard way. In our first focus group for this study, composed of political activists, we permitted participants to take control of the agenda and were treated to an hour of prepared speeches, written documents, and a general inveighing against the governmental policy. After this hour, we called for a “time out,” explained our purposes, and in effect asked to begin all over again. Having said their piece, the activists were willing to comply, and the next 90 min proceeded according to our design, to our surprise and to the reported increased awareness of the participants.

For the gays in the military study, our spiral began with a discussion of life in the military—the good things, the bad things, and what made it different from civilian life. We differentiated between conditions on and away from work stations. From there, we discussed how one becomes socialized to the military way of life. The next round inward involved how the participants reacted to racial and then gender integration within the military. Only after about 45 min did we turn to the main topic of gays in the military, the proposed change in regulations, and the consequences perceived by participants of such a change. As we noted above, the groups for the most part acceded to our agenda; the one exception was when the unit commander recruited the group to “tell those RAND people what we thought about gays.” In this session, the spiraling did not proceed too well, there was a good deal of posturing, and there was a good deal of heat compared to the light of other groups.

For the blood banking study, we followed the model of the gays in the military study fairly closely, beginning with a discussion of what it meant to work for a blood bank, life within and outside the workplace, and how the participants felt about working within a highly regulated business. From there, we turned to participants’ perceptions of training and enforcement of the regulations.

For the airport safety study, the focus was not directly on aviation safety, but rather on the place of aviation safety among other risks of daily life. We therefore spiraled in on “external safety,” or the risks resulting from where one lives over which one has virtually no control. The spiral began with general living conditions within the community, moved to risks and what one can do about various risks, and then to risks that cannot be controlled.

Placing the main issue at the center of the spiral permitted us to address the various policy options in the context of their larger effects, not just the main impact. Participants were able to consider long-term as well as short-term consequences, more explicitly associate their own values with suggested policy alternatives, and therefore think through the consequences of the policy options. In this
way, the outcomes of the focus groups were able to assist the policy analysts in understanding the benefits, costs, and feasibility of different policies.

**Form a Small and Multidisciplinary Research Team**

The assembly of the research team is almost as important as the choice of focus group members. For conducting focus groups on policy problems, the ideal research team is small and multidisciplinary. The group moderator should be somebody who has experience in leading groups; the task should not be left to a subject matter expert inexperienced in group dynamics. This does not mean that subject matter experts should be excluded; especially when the topic has some technical complexity, a subject matter expert can be a useful resource. In the river dike study, a subject matter expert attended the focus groups and answered technical questions posed by participants. The expert did not volunteer information but provided the basis for a common understanding only when requested to by either the group members or the moderator. A third necessary member of the research team is a rapporteur. Although a verbatim transcript of the session is not mandatory (and would have been impossible to obtain in the military and blood bank studies), some of the comments of the participants are worth recording (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992). Arming the rapporteur with a laptop computer greatly improves his or her note-taking capability. This activity does limit the extent to which the rapporteur can participate in the discussion but does not eliminate it completely.

Occasionally, the client commissioning the focus group study will wish to attend the focus group meeting. We generally discourage this for two reasons. First, it increases the number of observers when the situation calls for a minimum of hangers on. Second, the client may be perceived as “part of the problem,” in which case group members will address their contributions to the client rather than to each other.

Where strict confidentiality is not an issue, sessions can be videotaped for later viewing, to allow clients to view the sessions without attending. Participants rarely object to the video camera and tend to ignore it after a few minutes.

**Don’t Be Afraid to Obtain Quantitative Data**

Although focus group technique is almost universally regarded as a qualitative data collection method, it is possible to use groups to generate limited amounts of quantitative data. In order not to interfere with the flow of the discussion, questionnaires, ratings forms, scorecards, or whatever instruments are used should come at the end of the session, in a clearly separated part of the meeting (author-related citation). Of the four case studies reported here, only the airport safety focus groups included the collection of quantitative data. Respondents were asked to rate 12
risks (including an airplane crashing into a neighborhood) in terms of their perceived likelihood, the extent to which the risk was a concern, and whether the degree of risk was acceptable.

The choice of whether or not to collect quantitative data at the end of a focus group involves a trade-off between factors affecting validity. On the one hand, the responses of the group members, coming after a discussion, are based on a common understanding and are therefore more likely to be on the same subjective scale. On the other hand, respondents are aware of their own position in the group, and even though questionnaires may be confidential, there is a possibility of a social desirability or other biasing effect. Our own experience has been that the advantages of quantitative summary measures, especially for comparing with other tools in the policy analysis, generally outweigh the disadvantages, and that the potential biases are rarely manifested in practice.

Using Focus Groups in the Larger Policy Analysis

Focus groups provide a perspective on a policy problem difficult to achieve by other means. Homogeneous focus groups explore issues in depth rather than debating them, and the use of multiple groups permits the differences in stakeholder positions to be drawn out in detail. The spiral protocol places the issue in context rather than igniting flames. This also helps to relate the participants’ perceptions to the results of other analyses. Generally, focus groups create positive feedback loops to amplify the commonalities that may be found within and across groups. These positive features of policy analysis focus groups may be used for two different purposes: first, the participants become part of the policy process, and this will broaden the acceptability and potential value of the study; and second, the subjective viewpoint emerging from the focus groups helps provide a comprehensive analysis that includes political and cultural constraints that could influence the ultimate implementation of policy.

Participants Become Part of the Process

At the center of the spiral of discussion are the policy alternatives to be considered. After a discussion that places these policies in an appropriate context, the group is poised to consider the merits and disadvantages of policy options that may be developed by either the research team or the groups themselves. In this way, the researchers can anticipate stakeholder reactions to major policy alternatives.

A major benefit of a discussion of policy alternatives is that the respondents become part of the policy process. They have the opportunity to discuss policy alternatives and express new ones themselves and therefore perceive themselves as part of the larger decision-making process. To make this joining easier, the group should be promised that it will receive feedback on the results of all of the focus groups (and this promise should be fulfilled).
Sclove (1994), seeking to broaden public participation in the policymaking process, advocates using focus groups to involve “ordinary citizens” in even “difficult” areas such as technology policy. Recently, for example, a panel of ordinary Danish citizens spent several days hearing expert presentations on genetic manipulation in animal breeding. After cross-examining the experts and deliberating among themselves, the citizens decided that it would be entirely unacceptable to genetically engineer new pets but ethical to use such methods to develop a treatment for cancer. In this sense, then, the purpose of a focus group is to detect consensus when it exists, both within and across groups, not to create a consensus. It is important that the full range of viewpoints be expressed, and there should not be any pressure to reduce disagreements to a lowest common denominator at which agreement may be obtained.

The focus on policy alternatives is particularly important to gain the support and openness of active interest groups, because it gives them voice in the political process. Often groups, such as the action group Red Ons Rivieren in the river dike study, arrive at the meeting with an agenda, complete with documentation, prepared speeches, and a list of objections to what they perceive will be offered to them. In such instances, we first let the group express itself, acknowledge its positions by reflecting its concerns back to it, and state that we will arrive at a discussion of the alternatives it wishes to promote but first wish to understand its reasoning in getting there.

*Use the Experience to Further the Policy Process*

A major advantage of involving stakeholder groups in the policymaking process via focus groups is that the groups can later identify their role in generating the policy that results. This “giving of voice” leads the groups to perceive the process as fair and makes them more willing to live with policies that are, in their views, less than perfect. In this way, the openness of the process builds popular support for the inevitable compromises that have to be made.

The policy-oriented discussion is also useful because it will uncover potential problems of implementation. As focus groups consider their reactions to proposed policy alternatives, they will reveal facilitators and barriers to implementation. For those alternatives that they favor, the discussion can generate ideas for an implementation strategy. For those alternatives they reject, their dissatisfaction can help show where implementation will be difficult should one of those alternatives eventually be pursued.

Finally, the openness of a policy-oriented focus group can help avoid misunderstandings, so that when the policy is eventually chosen, the advantages and disadvantages have been fully thought out, the interest groups who will be relative winners and losers will be known, and the public reaction to the policy will not come as a surprise.
References


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Web Resources

<http://www.library.ca.gov/html/statseg2a.cfm/v7n1.pdf>

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