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# The Fallibility of Focus Groups

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In many cases, focus groups can be a useful tool. They are an excellent method for brainstorming ideas about products in order to inform future research. Further, a focus group format can be used to bring together a diverse group of people, such as current customers, and company developers and designers, for a collaborative discussion.

However, the very nature of focus groups (asking direct questions in a group setting) engenders a number of problems for eliciting people's opinions or preferences. Cognitive psychology has examined a range of biases in people's judgments that can arise from just this type of situation.

“*People have difficulty providing an accurate account of their true preferences*”

People have difficulty providing an accurate account of their true preferences. In many cases, people cannot predict how they will feel about things in the future (Loewenstein, O'Donoghue, & Rabin, 2000 – see link), or accurately recall how they thought about things in the past (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2001 – see link). Further, people's preferences have been shown to be easily influenced by a number of factors, including active goals (Markman & Brendl, 2000 – see link) and how available a particular aspect (such as price) is to their minds (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In other words, simply asking what people want is not a generally successful practice; indirect measures are needed to “uncover” people's preferences.

People make different choices when these choices are public (as opposed to when they report them anonymously). Instead of choosing what really seems most useful or desirable to them, people will select the options that are the easiest to defend (Tetlock, 1992). Further, people may make the choices that they feel make them “look good” to others in the group.

In group settings, people are often swayed by vocal group members. The opinions produced by a group may only reflect those of a small subset of the group (Eliaz, Ray, & Razin, 2005 – see link). Further, Many people may not speak up at all in a group setting because they feel intimidated; this results in a loss of data.

Even when data such as preference ratings are acquired individually after the focus group session, the opinions of individual group members may have been altered by those of the other members of the group - Asch (1951 - see link).

The judgments produced by focus groups are specifically *group* judgments: the opinions gathered from a group of five people are not the same as those that would have been produced by those same five people individually. Decision-making in a group involves a number of processes that are not involved in individual decision-making (Miner, 1984; Michaelsen, Watson, & Black, 1989).

Context (how and where the decision takes place) plays a large role in how people make choices. When deciding whether focus group research will sufficiently answer questions you have about your service or product, consider the following question: will your product typically be purchased or used by a group of people together, or will it be evaluated by individual customers? For the most accurate information about what your customers want from your product, their preferences should be elicited in a context similar to that in which they would use your product.

“*Context plays a large role in how people make choices*”

While focus groups certainly have their place in market research, the majority of questions that need to be answered about a product or service may require more controlled settings where information is collected on an individual basis. A scientifically rigorous study focusing on individual customers and using indirect methods of eliciting preferences will ultimately produce more accurate and useful data.

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## Links

Loewenstein, O'Donoghue, & Rabin, 2000: <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~rabin/project.pdf>

Bonds-Raacke, Fryer, Nicks, & Durr, 2001:

[http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list\\_uids=11478572&dopt=Citation](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=11478572&dopt=Citation)

Markman & Brendl (2000) <http://faculty.insead.edu/brendl/pdfs/Influence%20of%20goal.pdf>

Eliaz, Ray, & Razin, 2005: [http://econ.tau.ac.il/summer\\_workshop/razin.pdf](http://econ.tau.ac.il/summer_workshop/razin.pdf)

Asch conformity study: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch\\_conformity\\_experiments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments)