



In defense of qualitative participants

I will be one of the first people to admit that the field of qualitative research is not without justified criticisms. Having spent part of my career on the client and agency sides of the marketing business, there have been times when qualitative research has fallen short of meeting the objectives of a particular project.

Looking back on projects that didn't provide meaningful insight into a research problem, there can be a variety of reasons for failure. At one end of the spectrum, a qualitative approach may not have been appropriate given project objectives. At the other end, a project may have been mismanaged and simply blew up. One explanation though, which I am unwilling to accept, is that the participants themselves are part of the problem.

Those of us directly involved in qualitative research are sensitive to the ways in which others outside our field speak about qualitative participants. During the course of my career I have heard qualitative participants described as:

"Eight people in a room lying to each other."

"People who are only there for the money."

"Consumers who tell you what they think you want to hear."

I am sure that you could add to this list. These characterizations of qualitative participants are not only wrong but just plain ignorant. While it is true that people are paid to participate in qualitative research, I have yet to see a shred of evidence that suggests that participants are incented to lie during a group discussion (why would it be in their best interest to do so?). While participants know that others are observing them behind a mirror, and while some dominant individuals in a group may influence others, a well-trained moderator can prevent such dynamics from negatively influencing a group.

Are unwarranted

I would like to share with you a specific example of why I feel negative views about qualitative participants are unwarranted.

I was recently conducting an online focus group with mothers around the topic of shopping behavior. The group was going great until a technical error on the hosting site kicked out the modera-

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tor and all observers; the participants themselves were not affected. The problem was resolved 15 minutes later and I rejoined the discussion, fully expecting a majority of participants to have left the session (kind of like when a professor is late to class). To my surprise, we did not lose a single participant.

Their willingness to stay online even though I was unable to continue the interview affirmed my faith that participants are not just there to answer questions and that they actually enjoy the social aspects that qualitative research provides. However, I was even more surprised when I read the transcripts of the discussion that occurred between the time I was kicked out of the group and the time I was let back in. These women bonded together about being moms. In addition, they served as a

support group for one woman who opened up about the anxiety she has been experiencing over her husband's deployment to Iraq and their failed attempt to adopt a child.

Such examples of empathy are not only evident in online qualitative research; in the offline world I have seen participants make themselves completely vulnerable to strangers. I have seen Kleenex pass between two crying mothers. I have heard women talk about the challenges of sharing sexual intimacy with their husbands. I have had people admit to me how they felt after the sudden death of a child as well as the challenges of post-divorce dating in your 40s and 50s. The list goes on. I bring these up not to showcase my abilities as a moderator but to affirm that qualitative participants are more complex than certain criticisms suggest.

Safe and conducive

The key to success in having participants share highly emotional experiences with each other is in setting up an environment that is safe and conducive to sharing emotions. My ability to do this in a group is centered on a simple but powerful moderating philosophy: participants are people.

We often refer to participants as consumers, customers or segments. What we need to remember though, is that the people sitting on the other side of the glass (or com-

puter screen, as the case may be) are fellow human beings who have been invited to join a discussion with strangers about topics that are not necessarily always top-of-mind. I find the following helpful to set a safe environment in each session:

- Don't wait for the group to start to introduce yourself to participants. In traditional groups, oftentimes the moderator walks between the back room and the participant waiting room to check with the receptionist to see if everyone is present. In the online world, the moderator may be in a virtual viewing room while participants are in a virtual waiting room. Instead of being a mysterious figure, introduce yourself prior to the discussion and reassure participants that you will be starting shortly. This helps to put people at ease – especially if you are running a little late.
- Remember that the purpose of the first five to 10 minutes of a group is to help you establish rapport with everyone in the room. While it is tempting to jump right into the meat of the discussion, you must spend some time getting to know who is in the room before doing so. During this part of the discussion, share some personal things about yourself to remind participants that you are like them. I usually drop the fact

that I have been married for nine years and have triplets. This helps me to connect with participants on a personal level and helps them to open up to me, and each other, on a personal level.

- In traditional groups, use body language to your advantage by maintaining eye contact with whoever is speaking. Also, don't be afraid to lean toward whoever is talking as another way to show you are interested.
- Never underestimate the value of humor. Getting people to laugh helps bring defenses down and gets them to open up. I am not suggesting that you use the group to try out new material for amateur night at the Laugh Factory. Rather, use humor wisely and benefits will follow.

Refuse to accept

Sometimes qualitative research fails because it was not the right approach in the first place. Other times, failure could be the result of a poor moderator, incorrect screening criteria, poor screening on behalf of recruiters, going in with a poor guide, etc. All of these reasons can be prevented. The one reason that I refuse to accept, though, is that qualitative research itself is flawed because of our fellow human beings' motivations for participating in research. | Q