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The Devil's Advocate: A Strategy to Avoid Groupthink and Stimulate Discussion in Focus Groups

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The focus group is an increasingly popular qualitative research method in health research to gain insight into complex problems. Concerns have been expressed about how best to stimulate free and open discussion; especially on controversial issues and/or when the group comprises people with different power and status. A potential pitfall of the focus group technique is groupthink: the impact of censoring and conforming as described by such social psychologists as Irving Janis. The article describes an evaluation of a method to reduce groupthink and stimulate creativity and controversy in focus groups that analyzed consultation between an Australian federal government department and its communities. The article recommends to researchers using focus groups the selective use of devil's advocates to reflect different perspectives to groups, to ask questions in a different way, to introduce new questions, and to avoid groups arriving at premature solutions.

Focus groups have become a more commonly used method of data collection in health research in recent years. They are not a new

Authors' Note: We thank Christine Putland for managing the consultancy on which this work is based. Richard Cooke, Paul Laris, Frank Tesoriero, and Fiona Verity conducted and analyzed focus groups with us. Kathy Alexander was an associate con-

method, but their use, with a few exceptions (e.g., Merton, 1987; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956), had until recently been used in marketing research. Researchers in developing country settings have used focus groups as a method of obtaining local people's views on issues, such as attitudes to family planning (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981) and opinions about the introduction of new technology (Khan & Manderson, 1992). In developed country settings, there is an increasing number of research reports in health promotion (Murphy, Cockburn, & Murphy, 1992) and clinical areas that are based on focus groups. Also, texts on research and evaluation methods now routinely recommend their use (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Hawe, Degeling, & Hall, 1990; Patton, 1990).

Fortana and Frey (1994) have summed up their advantages as "being inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding and cumulative and elaborative" (p. 365). They also noted problems with the method that the "emerging group culture may interfere with individual expressions, the group may be dominated by one person, the group format makes it difficult to research sensitive topics, 'group think' is a possible outcome." Carey and Smith (1994) expressed concern about the lack of guidance for incorporating the impact of the group context in the analysis of data.

This article reports on a technique we have developed to overcome some of the shortcomings of focus groups identified above.

GROUPTHINK IN FOCUS GROUPS

Foremost among the criticisms of focus groups is the tendency for them to encourage groupthink. In particular, Carey and Smith (1994) stated that "the major pitfall of the focus group technique is the potential impact of censoring and conforming" (p. 124). Drawing on earlier work on groups and decision making by such social psychologists as Irving Janis and Solomon Asch, Carey and Smith cited "groupthink" and "group-mindlessness" as processes whereby per-

sultant. Jocelyn Auer conducted the evaluation of the focus groups. The consultancy referred to was funded by the National Health Advancement Division of the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health and Human Services, Australia. Address correspondence concerning this article to Colin MacDougall, Department of Public Health, Flinders University of South Australia, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide South Australia 5000; Phone: +61 8 8204 5691, Fax: +61 8 8204 5693; e-mail: colin.macdougall@flinders.edu.au

sons adjust their own behavior in response to their impressions of other group members. In their article, Carey and Smith discussed the need to take the group context into account when analyzing data, but they did not specifically address the issue of avoiding groupthink and stimulating discussion.

Janis (1982) began his research on groupthink after he read an account of the decision by the Kennedy administration in 1961 to place a small brigade of Cuban exiles secretly on a beachhead in Cuba with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the Castro government: the so-called Bay of Pigs decision. He noted that

the group that deliberated on the Bay of Pigs decision included men [*sic*] of considerable intellectual talent . . . all . . . were shrewd thinkers, capable of objective, rational analysis, and accustomed to speaking their minds. But collectively they failed to detect the serious flaws in the invasion plan. . . . The President and his key advisers approved the Bay of Pigs invasion plan on the basis of six assumptions, each of which was wrong. In retrospect, the President's advisers could see that even when they first began to discuss the plan, sufficient information was available to indicate that their assumptions were much too shaky. They could have obtained and used the crucial information beforehand to correct their false assumptions if at the group meetings they had been more critical and probing in fulfilling their advisory roles (p. 19).

Janis (1982) reported observations of widely contrasting groups whose members came from diverse sectors of society and were meeting for social, educational, vocational, or other purposes. He concluded that groups that developed high cohesiveness sought to maintain concurrence on important topics at the expense of ignoring realistic challenges to the consensus. This he called groupthink.

Janis (1982) made a number of recommendations for avoiding groupthink. Some are specific to the decision-making or policy group in a large organization and so are not discussed here. One suggestion, however, is that "at every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned the role of devil's advocate."

Janis (1982) did not formally define a devil's advocate, but he made the following observations:

1. The most effective performers in the role are likely to be those who can be truly devilish by raising new issues in a conventional, low-key style

asking such questions as, "Haven't we perhaps overlooked . . .?" "Shouldn't we give some thought to . . .?"

2. To avoid domestication of the devil, it may be best to rotate the role among the most talented role players in the group.
3. The devil's advocate should not be rude, strident, or insolent in pressing for an alternative point of view.
4. The group leader should give the devil's advocate license to present arguments as cleverly and convincingly as possible.
5. The role will not work if groups go through the motions: There are examples where the devil's advocate was not very devilish and indeed became domesticated.
6. Devil's advocates in one instance were only allowed to speak if they remained within the bounds of the group leader's views.
7. The devil's advocate must do more than create the feeling that the group has discussed alternatives: They must actually make a difference.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

We used devil's advocates in focus groups that formed part of a research consultancy analyzing the process of consultation during policy and decision making between an Australian federal government department and the communities and professional organizations with which it related frequently. Our aim was to design for the department guidelines for effective consultation. To discover how those consulted by the department viewed its consultation processes, we selected four recent examples of consultation and invited participants to attend focus groups to analyze the process of consultation and find out how well it had worked. We knew that in our focus groups there would be participants with differing power, status, knowledge, and interests in the outcome of the consultation. We knew also that our focus groups would bring together participants who had met before in order to debate contentious issues as part of the government decision-making process. Some participants represented lobby and interest groups with a history of involvement (and often conflict) in government decision making. Some of the consumer and community groups regarded the decisions being made by government as being extremely important for their health, their families, and their communities. Therefore, we were concerned to create a group climate that would elicit the range of responses that people had to the consultation and to allow members of the group to discuss their feelings and

responses to the consultation. We wanted to do all we could to avoid the common pitfall in consultation whereby the voices of individuals with power, status, and information spoke louder than those who challenged the dominant view or who did not have the benefit of power, status, and information.

The research plan was approved by the Federal government department's formally constituted Ethics Committee. In our submission to the Ethics Committee, we stated that the design of the research was affected by respect for participation of the community in the health research process and policies.

We used skilled leaders who carefully planned, recruited participants, and facilitated the focus groups using guidelines summarized by Murphy et al. (1992). Nevertheless, the groups promised to be challenging to run, and we suspected that many participants would be keen to talk about the topic of the consultation rather than the consultation process itself. Therefore, it would be difficult for a group leader to facilitate discussion, to deal with group processes, and to keep the discussion focused on the process, not the subject, of consultation. We decided that the group leader would be unlikely to be able to take special care to involve all participants fully: not only because of the extra demands but also because in the process the leader could well be seen to be taking a partisan role as advocate for a minority against the majority.

In our work, we started from Janis's (1982) position that a devil's advocate could be used in a group to promote creativity and avoid a group norm of uncritical concurrence with an emerging, dominant perspective. We hoped the role of devil's advocate would improve discussion and free the group leader to concentrate on group process and appear objective with respect to the content of discussion.

THE ROLE OF DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

We defined a *devil's advocate* as a "person who tests a proposition by arguing against it" (*The Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1991). The term comes from the Latin *advocates diaboli* and originally referred to the official whose function it is to put the case against beatification or canonization by the Roman Catholic Church (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). *Argue* means "to present reasons for or against a thing; to maintain in reasoning; to persuade, drive by

reasoning; to show, prove, imply, indicate" (*The Random House College Dictionary*, 1975).

For the focus groups we envisaged the role of the devil's advocate as constructive. We sought devil's advocates who could reflect to the groups a different perspective on discussion, ask questions in a different way, introduce new questions, and avoid groups arriving at premature solutions.

We decided to select two devil's advocates for each focus group because our preliminary analysis predicted that there would be two styles in the groups. The first we defined as *executive decision maker*, who would adopt the perspective of one who seeks to make decisions swiftly, using expert opinion effectively. This style values strong, quick decision making and is a characteristic valued by bureaucracy, by positivistic methodology, and by politicians. The second style was the *inclusive decision maker*, who would adopt the perspective of one who seeks to consult extensively and involve a range of organizations and communities in the decision-making process. This style accepts that decisions will take longer to make, is comfortable with diversity and conflict, and is consistent with the principles of many of the community groups that had been consulted by the federal department for which we were working. We chose these two styles to make transparent the diverse perspectives of focus group participants and to legitimize different approaches to the process of consultation. We wanted to acknowledge difference rather than allowing one style to dominate at the expense of the other or achieving an uneasy compromise that masked real differences.

When selecting devil's advocates, we looked for people with knowledge of the subject and good group skills. In addition, we sought people who had not played a role in the earlier consultation and who could therefore be seen as disinterested.

Our focus groups were run in three Australian states, so it was not feasible to conduct face-to-face training. We, therefore, used telephone conversations and written material to encourage the devil's advocates to do the following:

1. Identify themselves as devil's advocates at the beginning of the group.
2. Play the role of devil's advocate consistently (i.e., they should not switch between devil's advocate and contributor to discussion about the consultation).
3. Make their contribution in an assertive manner without seeking to dominate, to persuade, or to cajole.

4. Ask the focus group to consider how a group with a different point of view might view the current discussion.
5. Suggest that the question being considered could be asked in another way.
6. Frame a question that introduces a new angle on the discussion.
7. Alert the group to any leap from problem to solution that neglects argument and consideration of different perspectives.

We asked the devil's advocates not to seek to persuade the group to adopt a particular view by arguing for it repeatedly, or to imply or suggest that the group is wrong if they do not adopt a view put by the devil's advocate.

At the beginning of each focus group, the group leader's description of the process included a statement about the role of the devil's advocates. When group members introduced themselves, the devil's advocates described their experience and their role. Devil's advocates also wore different colored name badges from those of the participants and group leaders.

EVALUATION OF THE USE OF DEVIL'S ADVOCATES

The conduct of the focus groups was assessed by an independent evaluator who conducted a telephone interview with a sample of participants. Specific questions about the devil's advocates were included. All four focus groups were evaluated positively by participants. Most of the participants were very positive about the role of the devil's advocates, who were seen to contribute by pushing discussion along, drawing out underlying issues and key points, challenging when it would be difficult for leaders to challenge, testing the strength of views by pushing against them and seeing if their proponents bounce back, putting different viewpoints, opening up discussion, broadening debate, and conveying information in a neutral way. Comments included the following:

Consumer groups, government and industry all have to keep working together and so have to be a bit careful about what they can volunteer in the group. The devil's advocate can step in where they can't.

It was useful, I remember at least one occasion when the devil's advocate put another viewpoint that I hadn't considered—opens up your mind a bit.

Lots of things could be said by the devil's advocate that she . . . (in her official position) . . . could not say. Another way in.

Having the devil's advocate for the community felt good—good to have someone trying to point out things I hadn't thought about—and so we could talk about it.

I think devil's advocates were useful, they challenged some of what people were saying—this meant we had to respond back to that challenge and had to say more things to bring it out.

Devil's advocate was good at throwing questions to us and afterwards giving some information to justify and explain. Especially good if devil's advocate responds to challenges. Triggers off responses and discussion.

"Very useful. . . . They introduced several of the interactions, used humor well, kept arguments going from the devil's advocate point of view and drew out other side—useful also in conveying information.

Critical comments about devil's advocates were in three areas: becoming too involved in the content, quietness and frequency of involvement, and not knowing enough about the issues. We believe that face-to-face training including a trial focus group would deal with many of these criticisms.

A number of participants commented on the need to combine group process skills with knowledge of the content. For example, the devil's advocate "got too much into the issues"; "didn't quite focus on the process, got caught in the issues." On the other hand, one participant said the devil's advocate "would have been better if [he] had a better feel for the topic." A positive evaluation was of a devil's advocate who "pulled out the key points concisely without taking up too much space."

Some participants commented on the quietness and frequency of involvement. "I thought they were quite quiet"; "Not what I envisaged a devil's advocate would be. I would see them as being more hard-line and vocal. Knocking heads—putting opposing views. Nevertheless, I thought the idea a good one"; "Excellent, though she didn't get used as much as I thought she might"; "pontificated but still good value." One participant commented that it was good to have two devil's advocates "to cover the main stakeholder groups." A few participants from a smaller focus group wondered whether one devil's advocate could cover all perspectives to reduce the number of places in a small group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH USING FOCUS GROUPS

Our use of the devil's advocate suggests that they can contribute to opening up discussion in groups and avoid a convergence of views by allowing members to feel free to express divergent opinions.

The technique was particularly useful when groups were made up of people with differing levels of power. The role should be tailored to the particular circumstances of the research. If researchers are concerned that a broad range of views will not be canvassed in their group because group members will be reluctant to challenge dominant people within the group, then introducing devil's advocates to deal with differential power in the group should be considered. Furthermore, if researchers are concerned that the issues before the group are likely to generate impassioned or polarized debate, then devil's advocates could be considered to legitimize passion and diversity.

We do not, however, recommend that a devil's advocate be used rigidly and in every focus group. We agree with researchers who argue that the moderator should set a group climate that welcomes diversity (Krueger, 1994; Morgan & Krueger, 1994). The devil's advocate is one aspect of group process and reinforces the general point that it is vital to pay attention to group process when planning and conducting focus groups. It is important that researchers evaluate techniques such as the devil's advocate and be prepared to try different solutions according to the problem and context.

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