

## **LET US HAVE TWO FOCUSES!**

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Vicsek, Lilla: *Fókuszcsoport. Elméleti megfontolások és gyakorlati alkalmazás.* [Focus Groups. Theoretical Considerations and Practical Implementation. ] Budapest: Osiris, 2006.

Imagine: it is Monday morning at 10.45 a.m. Sunshine floods through the huge windows of the office of the multinational company situated at the bank of the Danube. The weekly board meeting will have to end in 12 minutes. The marketing manager of the company has been persuading the sales manager and the country manager for almost one quarter of an hour that it is the application of X of all the hastily announced competition of advertisements to stop the loss of market of the trade mark rushing downwards for the recent months. But they don't like the idea! The advertisement agency has a good standing, they have worked with them earlier; they are in good terms with everyone and have offered a considerable price cut. "Do you think the consumer would buy more of this? Or would this convince them to buy our premium product and not the private label half the price" (to explain: a product of one's own trademark - The Editor)? "We should return to the earlier funny boy as people still laugh at it." At a certain point the marketing manager is fed up with the barren dispute, for he still has to negotiate with two promotion agencies, next he has to go to the factory in the countryside to inspect the change in packaging, he has to tell his assistant what kinds of charts should be inserted into his presentation meant for the regional manager visiting in the second part of the week, and at any rate, he had been jet-skiing excessively during the week-end and he is aching all over. But next Monday a decision must be made, for we have reserved time at the media and if the film is not ready in three weeks' time we would lose 30 million. OK?" OK. Everything is OK.

The readers of this periodical may not meet similar dialogues too often, rather only as part of the work of some underground filmmakers. It is rather these kinds of arguments, motivations, considerations and business aims that are in the background of ordering focus groups of which about four to five thousand (!) are conducted annually in Hungary. Therefore I do not recommend Lilla Vicsek's book, I may say a gap-filling one even on international level, to those who commission the many thousand focus groups of business purposes and classified by the author under the major group of marketing, for they would get rather frightened.

Lilla Vicsek knows practically everything about focus groups whatever has been published so far in scholarly works. She must have had a rather busy programme during the past decade, for besides a large number of scholarly publications, presentations, scholarships and PhD she has set for herself as tasks she has been able to

acquire significant personal and practical experience. Thus the work, consisting of more than three hundred pages of her own writing, is at once a theoretical systematization offering the experience of 'I see!' even to seasoned researchers, and it is also like a manual offering daily support to practice. Yet even a beginner student of sociology may turn to it, as well as the graduating one forced to organize, conduct and analyze some groups as part of the compulsory diploma work, and the marketing expert already in the grudges of daily routine. The Contents is in fact like a good home-made pastry: everyone may take bits of it as needed. One may read only the practical part, one may be immersed in the basic theoretical issues, or open it here and there looking for tips and solutions for problems.

The structure of the book is somewhat of the New Wave, for it does not open with the survey of history-theory-and-literature, but with an Auftakt clarifying the concept, jumping headlong into the probably most disputed issue of focus groups, which is practical implementation. She raises problems not at all uniformly assessed by the profession already in the first part like the handling of dominant participants, the analytical difficulties of qualitative research, the relationship between phenomena explored by group methods and behavior, the interpretation of various levels of communication and other heavy-weight problems. She also touches upon the social psychological approach and the combined uses of the method. This strong opening may frighten away those who are beginning to get acquainted with the method, for the author would discuss concepts in detail only in the subsequent chapters, but those who have some experience, even if it is personal and not professional, the continued reading of the book greatly enhances appetite. Even this introductory part, perhaps loaded with a bit too numerous examples, personal experience and case description from the literature, deepens understanding and keeps up continuous excitement of reading it.

A social psychological survey, however, could not be avoided in the next step.

If scientifically viewed, a focus group is a strange formation. Let us be frank: it is nothing else but the most ancient form of human communication, it is a discussion of people turned into an empirical tool of study, just as "we used to sit around the fire thousands of years ago", and as such it has been part of human community existence for quite a long time. In fact the sessions of the council of elders, the communications of the Seven Chieftains or of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs can also be regarded as focus groups. It has been made a fashionable method (though here I would dispute the author's view, for I see its trend as more downward than upward during the past 4 or 5 years, but that would come later) by business pressure and considerations of comfort analyzed in detail by Lilla Vicsek, and not by its prominent exploratory force, reliability and standardization. Therefore literature and the theoretical framework are also rather broad, and it is a serious challenge to edit them within a clear-cut system, not offending domestic or foreign sources, but the author overcomes obstacles with ease. She presents the most basic concepts of social psychology also with a critical approach and complexity. I may be wrong but the limitations of extent may be blamed for reminding me of Karinthy's one-sentence summaries of plays when reading her description of certain trends and groups of theories, giving so compound versions of theories. Obviously she aimed at totality and presenting the diversity of approaches; but these descriptions are more suited for raising the curiosity of the average audience.

At the same time it is definitely a merit of the chapter that she presents the classical, traditional and New Wave approaches with rarely found democracy yet taking up her own position, interpreting and comparing them, but leaving the right to choice, commitment or even contradiction to the reader.

The two big chapters dealing with the practice of the organization and steering of focus groups makes almost one third of the book, thus pushing behind itself even the most extensive works on qualitative research or even expressly on the practice of focus groups. The author discusses in detail the Hungarian as well as international practice mostly based on Anglo-Saxon literature. We get acquainted with the practice of planning, organizing and executing research, raising useful dilemmas and encouraging thinking about the issues of moderation, digressing on the mainstream and the alternative solutions as well as on the major stumbling blocks. Vicsek does not stand for either approach or solution, she is of the view that it is rather confronting the given research problem and the possibilities that should determine the optimal solution and not the custom of the profession. One can only agree to it and hope. In practice, at least in the case of business-purpose, that is profit-oriented researches (rarely of a zero profit background, euphemistically called 'non-profit') unfortunately the balance tilts much more towards opportunity-based solutions than those determined by the set of goals. Those working in market research have to make decisions much more frequently on a moral than on a professional basis what kind of group structure they should recommend, and when and for answering what questions should they offer focus group as against the ever richer, diverse tool kit of quantitative research requiring special skills, just to remain with reality instead of calling it a jewel box. Unfortunately I could list several hundred cases when the researcher suggested a focus group instead of interviews-in-depth for finding an answer to a research issue that could obviously be built on individual narratives because the analysis of the latter one would require much more time and labor, because travel cost is less, the cost of typing is less, and most of all because that is what the Sacred Commissioner wants to see.

Ms Vicsek modestly avoids dealing with the manner unfortunately the majority of business commissioners behave themselves behind the detective's mirror. The commissioners often regard a focus group as an obligatory task, or a show, where the 'consumers' (they never refer to with the category of 'humans' pointing so strongly to the essence, for they always wish to hear the 'consumer or buyer' speak) are persons ordered there, interrogated and paid for and who are being 'researched', but why not 'into'? And this is by far not the most discouraging. To me it is even more upsetting when the commissioners are incapable of showing the most rudimentary empathy towards people to whom they wish to sell more of their products, more often and more regularly. It is expected from the focus-group descriptions produced by the diverse segmentation processes to fit to everyone like a diving suit, and if possible, those people should talk, laugh and particularly should look as expected or what they have dreamt of in respect of hairdo, waistline, brand of garments and jewelry. Because many marketing experts, and my apologies to the exceptions, imagine that they can reshape the thinking of people almost without limitations and even in keeping with their own image, and are expressly offended if the dear consumer is unable to reproduce faultlessly and word by word the slogan of the most recent ad campaign, or

he/she may not have understood the indirect and abstract positioning of the brand inconsistently communicated, and would not speak in superlatives about a product that has undergone already the third 'rationalization of product', in other words the type of transformation such as 'what-else-can-be-taken-out-of-the-product-without-being-noticed'. In fact the focus group was commissioned by someone (mostly the marketing person him- of herself) in the organization to understand what 'their consumer' is like. For if they paid even a little attention they would not only register the infinitely selfish and short-sighted dichotomies of likes-dislikes, remembers (revokes verbally)-does not remember, or interested-not interested in the best case, and would pick out sentences voluntarily from the context that would justify their marketing decisions of the value of tens or hundreds of millions, they would then realize that people, practically irrespective of their level of education, are still capable of thinking about something different from considering what chocolate, washing powder, hand cream and credit, cell phone or soup cubes to buy. And that the trademark and promises of the cream against wrinkles around the eyes are not issues of life and death. And that there are still issues of life and death and they are the same, even if in a different form of manifestation, as they have been for many millennia, such as love and affection, freedom and family, peace and justice, and similar general values and norms. For focus groups are very misleading even for the commissioner. The fact that a focus group studies human thinking artificially, applying the moderator's questions in a standardized way from group to group under laboratory experimental conditions, no matter how green we paint the walls and how wide a funnel is used to the canalizing of thoughts, the misconception may develop even in the commissioner, that it is fruit yoghurt, cell phone or cream against foot mycosis that is important to people after all. For if they were capable of talking about these items for two hours at a time then obviously they are very important in their lives!

And according to my opinion/sensing/view who has been watching the life history of focus groups closely during the past almost twenty years it is just this reason why the fashion of the matter is beginning to wear, even if not fast, or, to put it differently, to find its proper place. In those countries where it is really a must to pay attention to the consumer because practically everything has been sold to him/her whatever one may desire, so in places like that if the consumer is not watched with keen eyes which place of entertainment is the most trendy on 1 June as contrasted to the one on 15 May, if it is not understood what idols are produced by mass culture in a broad sense and for itself from day to day, then it is the end. It is the end of the given brand, variant of product, service package, but mostly of the given marketing expert. If he or she is unable to produce a good insight out of him- or herself that would be regarded by the consumer literally as his or her own, then the marketing person is finished and we are sorry, he or she may go to an underdeveloped post-socialist new EU-member Balkans country as a brand manager. But that does not seem to be such a big hit. It is difficult to listen to and particularly to pay attention behind the mirror. It is better to look out. They have learned to listen and particularly to pay attention behind the mirror. They do not believe in every word of the notorious novel costing HUF 1999. There is real interest in them, ability to pay attention, and even humility towards those people whose money they are out for. They do not believe that it is enough to repeat sufficiently many times

any kind of stupidity and then they are going to behave, feel, believe and think accordingly. This is the reason why researches of a cultural anthropological approach have been spreading fast, researches conducted by the so-called ethnographic methods, when we are not tearing them off their real situations, we do not force them into our space and time, neither into our thinking. We rather try to observe, listen and interrogate – but not to tap – with ethical means if possible (there is still scope to develop in this respect), photograph and film them, read blogs and chat with them, to do and live the life together with them, the way as it exists without marketing and research. Naturally it is far more indirect and slow to explore with the help of these sources that otherwise would yield significantly deeper and more reliable information than the ones currently needed by the marketing expert. And here again those analytical methods come into the picture that are presented by Vicsek in her book with unique detail and with practice that can be mostly used, and even beyond them there are several techniques of analyzing documents or of visual analysis that have not cropped up in relation to the focus groups.

Surely there are to be large numbers of focus groups in the coming decades, mostly in the proximity of our GPS coordinates. Because they seem to be fast, simple and spectacular as well as mostly unambiguous to the commissioner, who, if he/she only considered a fragment of what has been collected about him/her by Lilla Vicsek concerning expectations from researchers, would commission much fewer groups.

Not because they would realize that from commissioning a focus group to the completion of the analysis much more professional knowledge is needed than imagined by them, for not many of them are at all preoccupied with this issue. The reason is not that they would have to become uncertain by themselves but that they would have to face the fact that whatever the people say is not necessarily what they think and what they would subsequently do, at least as most of the commissioners interpret the consumers' words, opinion and views. And then they would not risk having just two focuses before they pushed another thirty million into the media industry, for that requires very solid faith. In fact this thing does function, namely media industry. Dear Lilla Vicsek, about five to six thousand people live on market research and their jobs should be guarded. Therefore I would be personally very happy if you could add another three to four hundred pages to this book and would go into detail with scientific accuracy of all those questions you had no opportunity to do so in this edition. You have written very little about techniques applied in groups, there must be reserves in this topic of some one hundred pages. It is true, however, that others have written a great deal about it elsewhere, but perhaps the projective techniques are developing so fast because they are so much attacked when applied for market research. A further possibility of extension is that both the content and form of visual approach have been pushed into the background, and I very much miss it, particularly in the analytical part, for it is the same considerations of effectiveness that assert themselves in the presentations of market research as in the choice of method: only the fast and simple statements and findings bringing along direct gain that have a chance to produce profit. As marketing companies are themselves profit producing, they respect this principle. And it is information that can be grasped visually that meets it best. Color tables are also needed for this book; I hope the sponsor was not missing to it.

There is another opportunity of 40 to 50 pages for the topics of research planning if it is viewed from the angle of market research. The optimization of the bargaining process between client and researcher, interest conciliation and the coordination of the factors of competition is a kind of science. The same applies to internal organizational factors within the research company: those doing the organization of research inside may have tremendous influence on the ultimate outcome of focus groups by the process of selection, today the phenomenon of group inhabitants does not make anyone laugh, for it endangers the entire profession, and the result may easily be the loss of confidence on the commissioner's side, therefore two or three chapters would be welcome here, too. It would be definitely worth writing in much greater detail about the combination and supplementing of focus groups and other (even quantitative) methods, for according to my experience this is what would ultimately lead to the gradual loss of the prominence of the focus group, and here, too, I see a capacity of about eighty thousand characters to be written.

And if all this is done you would have no problem with your academic doctorate, and we may rest assured that the commissioners would keep your book on their shelf because of its thickness, and would continue to bravely have two focuses. Or even three. And everyone would benefit from it: the commissioners may rest assured that their decisions worth ten or one hundred million on the basis of a few focus groups are based on scientific foundations, researchers would continue to have daily work and would be able to analyze (secretly) the groups even more thoroughly, and the seedlings and fully developed specimens of researchers may learn from a real professional book. Until then we should read this already well useable book with joy, and should rather put on sunglasses against sunshine piercing our eyes at the board meeting.