

Mad Myth 1 : how many of them actually said that?

Where shall I start? This is one of the most common misunderstandings of qualitative procedures. It tells both of the quantitative (how much, how many?) orientation of many buyers and practitioners - and more fundamentally in group work - it demonstrates the failure to take the group seriously! It is part of what David Rennie, a brilliant academic commentator on qualitative process calls, *"Dragging the chains of positivism along the corridor of qualitative inquiry."* A bit of a fancy metaphor but it makes the point!

I'm going to tackle the quant. bias first. No matter how many people said or didn't say something in a qualitative study it has no statistical validity at National or Regional levels. It may have face validity and be a jolly useful insight that happens to scale up, but it is no test for the frequency or universality of the idea across large populations at this early stage. However, although every sensible client and researcher knows this, it still emerges as the question people ask, **because they don't know a language for better questions.** It is a failure of the qualitative industry generally to inform and teach our clients better questions to ask of us.

In my experience almost all groups in the US and the majority of those in the UK are of this type. They are next to worthless as sources of insight. What they produce is normative opinion. Most clients already have tons of data on this. They know their brand attributes, which matter, what peoples' opinions on their brand are. They have been tracking these for years.

Desperate qualitative researchers are squeezing the best out of procedures that simply are not group efforts.

Why are these group aggregated opinions dangerous to take as the truth? Most things we say just because it's our turn, we're due to speak, we're feeling left out, this subject doesn't have any/much significance for us, we want to get attention away from ourselves and conforming is easiest and being an agreeable member of the group seems of more social value than dissent or ambivalence. We are caught up in the dilemma of longing for attention but fearing that the scrutiny might reveal our vulnerabilities.

Group remarks are likely to be based on **winning formulae** we've used before - which have got us noticed, made us feel included, eliminated a sticky moment, allayed our inner critic etc. In other words, we say them because we always say them when we're feeling the need to say something in a situation where we're trying to do well and prove ourselves a valuable member of the group. Groups are full of such utterances and they promote norms and comfort among participants - **they usually DO NOT describe pivotal feelings or motivations about your brand or product.** Because of this, *stuff that lots of people say or agree with is likely to be the least significant of all the things they say. In my experience the really telling remarks are those that stand out from the others!* In other words most of what people say in groups is the 'small talk' of groups - establishing norms and functionality.

The more you add questions, adopt a go-round answering style, give each question a few moments before you move on and '*conduct*' a Q&A in armchairs, the less insightful what your group say and do will be.

Quite simply this means that counting or extracting the most frequent responses will usually land you the booby prize! The 'how many said that?' question leads us to focus on remarks driven by the need to norm as the most significant when they are neither significant or really about the product or service at all! They are about managing the atmosphere in the group so that participants feel safe.

Insight nearly always emerges from things you haven't heard before, or things said in a way you've never thought of before. It does not reside in polite, safe, normative remarks unless these serve a deeper purpose for the brand or service. It can even reside in things that are missing, like aspects of behaviour or decisions that are not adequately explained by normative talk.

There is, however, a more serious issue underlying this: **what I call 'the failure to take the group seriously'**. Nearly all of us, practitioners, clients, psychologists alike really harbour the notion that **the group is actually a collection of individuals whose statements can be aggregated or counted to generate an analysis**. But what if the group is really an entity with character and personality in its own right. And that the people in it, for the time of the group, are parts of a whole? In other words that the voices in the group are sub-personalities of the group personality and that this is **the** aspect of the group worth attending to.

How did it feel to be with this composite person, this group? What parts of this person did you meet (sub-personalities)? What feelings came up in you, the facilitator whilst with this 'person'? If you were this 'group' what would you be up to? Why would you say this, or that?

If you had to offer a sensible explanation of your feelings about this group, how would you explain it?

As well as feelings, there is usually a tone of voice that the group 'finds' after a while. If you have too intensive a topic guide, this tone of voice is likely to be dependent - waiting for the next question. Such tones are flat, polite, take-it-in-turns in form and resemble people giving answers on a questionnaire.

How do you get around this issue? By taking the group seriously. What does that mean in process terms? It means that you offer to the group as a whole the problem, topic or issues that you seek insight on - and allow them to work on it together, without you as the centre of the wheel. You allow them to interact, free of your constant monitoring and interference and report back to you on their deliberations. You can set them a challenge in the way they present these back to you. You can divide them into two groups and allow them to witness each other's solutions and discuss them.

As moderator you can encourage spontaneity in tone and content by setting challenges for the group which it cannot solve by Q&A or rational processes. We teach such processes on the Advanced Practitioner's Course.