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Methodological Evaluation: A Review of Focus Group Discussion

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Abstract

Focus group discussion is an interactive and collaborative methodology in which a group of people, comprised of researchers and the people researched, come together in a specific setting to discuss the topic being studied. The moderator developed discussion questions to keep the discussion focused. This dynamic and creative method is widely used in human geography and other social sciences disciplines to understand people's perspectives on the discussion topic. Moreover, focus group techniques depend on various factors like local context, political/global environment, location, age, and discussion time, including the nature of the research topic. The reason scholars use this method is that focus groups provide space for vulnerable people to share their views and opinions and give them the opportunity to discuss the topic in groups that they may not normally discuss. Moreover, it is also used to creatively engage participants, prompt their responses, and increase participants' interest. For the successful focus groups, some factors are considered carefully with respect to the participants' viability, such as the feasibility of discussion time for the participants and local language, as focus groups have the potential to shift the power balance to participants, but if they are not comfortable with the language, it can lead to a power imbalance and influence their empowerment to participate freely and develop a dynamic discussion in the group. There are no set standards for conducting in-depth focus groups, but researchers need to carefully consider focus group techniques, group composition, size, target population, time, and location by the research topic.

Keywords: Focus Group Discussion; Qualitative Research; In-Depth Knowledge; Participant Engagement; Moderator/Facilitator

1. Introduction

Focus group discussion is an engaging/interactive research method, and the potential of this method is to produce cooperative knowledge. It is a useful method to critically way to analyze how different meanings people assign/give to places and relationships. Through this two-way group discussion researchers or moderator introduced topics of mutual interest to the group participants. The aim is to collect data from the group discussion and the moderator prepared questions and prompts to keep the discussion "focused". However, in geography and other disciplines, a few things are important to consider when conducting FGD such as discussion time, group composition, group size, and different ways to interpret verbal and non-verbal responses of the participants and the flexibility of the discussion (DeLyser et.al, 2010). According to Hopkins (2007) group size or the number of participants matters in relation to the location, age, composition, and nature of the topic being studied. FGD is divided into two categories traditional FGD (usually used in market and opinion research) and in-depth use for critical research in geography. The in-depth focus groups allow reflexive and supportive discussion. The in-depth focus groups provide a supportive environment for the participants and have the potential to shift power between the researcher and the participants (DeLyser et.al, 2010).

According to feminist researchers focus groups are appropriate for the marginalized and oppressed groups because of it's potential to shift power from the researcher to the participants. Moreover, it is also valuable to understand the

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collective experience of marginalizing and challenging the existing notions about race and gender. It provides space for the marginalized whose opinions may be constructed through dominant discourses and are not considered valid sources of knowledge (Pollack, 2003). Hamby (2018), the open-ended method (focus groups & interviews) gives participants space to freely share their experiences and perspectives and also explore key insights not covered or missed in quantitative methods like surveys. Apart from gender lens, some research topics may be a best fit for quantitative research, such as labour productivity, job satisfaction, job performance, and financial estimation, despite their focus on marginalized communities like women and farmers (Hureem & Butt, 2018; Ashraf et al. 2022; Khalid et al., 2022; Hureem et al., 2020).

2. Focus Group Discussion to understand Health problems

Salim et al. (2016) used focus group discussions to understand the problem of chronic malnutrition in under five children in Pakistan. The study highlighted the importance of a mother's awareness of weaning food (semi-solid), its time, quantity, quality, and type can affect the infant's nutrition status. These factors are needed for infants' healthy growth and to avoid poor cognition and physical development. Pakistan's geo-political, demographic, cultural and economic factors are different from the rest of the world. So, it is important to know the perspectives and practices of mothers from low socio-economic status about weaning. The focus groups were conducted by mothers in urban slums to assess the weaning education of mothers. The reason for using this method was because focus groups provide space for vulnerable people to share their views and opinions and also give them the opportunity to discuss the topic in groups which usually may not be discussed. Based on this reason, focus groups were conducted to collect detailed information about the weaning practices of urban slum mothers. Three focus groups in three urban slum areas of the city were conducted in government health dispensaries. The participants were selected through simple random sampling by using the list of the slum areas in Lahore city. Focus groups comprised 10 participants in each group, mothers of 6-24-month infants were selected through convenience sampling. The group size was larger through focus groups are the least structured method, but a small group size is easy to manage, provides more space and time to all participants, and creates more dynamic discussions for some tricky/technical topics like chronic malnutrition (DeLyser et al, 2010).

The rationale behind the location was, that on Saturday mothers used to come to the dispensary for vaccination. It is considered a convenient time to gather them for discussions. The participants ranged from 20-30 and the discussion was two hours long.

The first thing is, for the successful focus groups some factors are considered carefully with respect to the participants' viability. For instance, discussion time should be feasible for the participants, especially with regard to specific populations like mothers. The researcher should think about the time feasible for most mothers. There are chances the mothers who agree with the discussion may not be comfortable spending two hours outside their domestic responsibilities. Culturally in the morning, they are over-occupied. Maybe they were willing to participate but not fully engaged. The unwillingness of some mothers to participate was due to their family engagement and they wanted to go back right after vaccination. Second, the researcher was not familiar with the local language; *Punjab*, the discussion was conducted in *Urdu*, and a local female translator was selected for translation and interpretation of mothers' perspectives where needed. The results indicated that participants' responses to weaning food were vague and insufficient. The language barrier can be one of the reasons, mothers may not understand the questions or the context of questions in *Urdu* language. The results may be different if the discussion was conducted in the local language as participants would be comfortable expressing and sharing their views in detail. So, it is unsure if mothers' knowledge about weaning food was poor or whether they could not fully express their weaning perspectives and practices. Also, focus groups have the potential to shift the power balance to participants but if they are not comfortable with the language it can lead to power imbalance and influence their empowerment to participate freely and develop the dynamic discussion in the group. It can also influence the interactive strategy for the discussion as most of the time moderators and participants do not communicate in the same language (DeLyser et al, 2010; Pollack, 2003; Hamby, 2018). The focus groups were homogenous, and it is sometimes better to have people with shared experiences and who belong to similar circumstances. The participants with different educational levels and socio-economic status may create a power imbalance within groups. Participants with little or no education and low socio-economic status may not share views freely or understand or engage in discussion with their counterparts (Hopkins, 2007; Wong, 2008).

3. Focus Groups to Explore Student Barriers

Bourne and Naomi (2021) used activity-oriented questions in focus group discussions to understand students' barriers to engaging with their feedback in higher education. In these focus groups, different activities are used creatively to engage participants, prompt their responses, and increase participants' interest. Colucci (2007) discussed activity-

oriented questions in focus groups as a fun strategy to increase participants' interest and collect in-depth and valuable information. These activities are productive, and creative supplements to the verbal discussion questions. It is a helpful strategy for research with youth and on sensitive topics. However, it has some limitations of individual dominant participant, is not appropriate for all student engagement, and depends on the nature of the topic, age, and length of the session.

Bourne and Naomi (2021) recruited undergraduate students through convenience sampling, and six focus groups were conducted with a total of 33 participants in different locations on campus. The activities were designed to stimulate participation and generate dynamic discussion. A note taker was there to capture/record non-verbal representations like participants' body language, facial expressions, and behavior within groups.

Different activities were designed like reflect and share, group raking, and artifact review. In group raking students were asked to list and rank resources they think support students' engagement with feedback. Through Reflect and Share activity students were asked to work in a group and complete a worksheet. In the last activity, students shared mock feedback tools and asked them to review and share suggestions for improvements based on what they liked or disliked.

Participants play the role of facilitator and ask questions to each other in the groups. Like in reflect and share activity students ask each other about their perspectives and practices on receiving feedback. It diminishes the power balance between researcher and participant because participants directly ask questions to each other, not the researcher. It is a good strategy to give more autonomy and power to the participants and create more space for discussions. However, it depends on the topic like feedback is not a tricky or sensitive topic, but for some sensitive information like abuse, or suicide it may need different activities like listing may work out. This strategy is used with youth to stimulate discussion and here the target population is young students who may need reflective participation to discuss shared views (Bourne and Naomi, 2021).

The focus group size is not large, comprising 6 is good for reflective participation and addressing activity-based questions. Students in small groups were more confident and comfortable interacting with each other, asking direct questions, sharing opinions, and debriefing sessions with the researcher. Moreover, participants were selected from different departments, health, arts, and engineering to capture the diverse feedback experience and suggestions from students across different disciplines. Also, students were more engaged in the activities than in the group discussions (Bourne and Naomi, 2021). Activity-oriented questions are sometimes difficult to manage and hard to maintain the focus. Activity-oriented questions enabled participants to actively participate in the discussion, and when they lost focus, split into small groups to maintain focus (Colucci, 2007). Through debriefing sessions, the moderator and research assistant/note-takers realized that participants lacked interest, yawned in the group discussion, did not consciously listen to others whereas, they actively participated in the activities (Bourne and Naomi, 2021).

4. Focus Groups to explore access to Health Services

Bollini et al. (2007) used focus groups to explore the factors influencing pregnancy, delivery, and access to health services in migrant women in the Swiss healthcare system. Eight focus groups with a total of 40 Turkish, Portuguese, and Swiss women were conducted. 14 Turkish, 17 Portuguese, and 9 Swiss participants were selected through convenience sampling. The reason to recruit native and migrant participants was to understand individual and groups shared experiences of health. Turkish portages are the largest population in Switzerland. The rationale behind the inclusion of Swiss women is to understand the cultural values and health services in the country and identify the common factors women share across nationalities. Each session/discussion lasted for three hours and was led by two female researchers. A Turkish translator was for a session with the Turkish women; Portuguese participants did not need a translator. The migrant group participants were less educated, unskilled, and compared to the Swiss. Focus groups were conducted separately with migrant and native groups and gathered similar and different perspectives.

Salim et al. (2016) and Bollini et al. (2007) used translators for focus groups due to the language barrier. Usually, qualitative research is conducted in the native language, and the purpose of in-depth focus groups is also to get detailed information through interactive and collaborative discussion among participants and researchers. The language problem may influence the depth of knowledge as the Translator lacks researcher skills, not trained in a moderator or facilitator role (Maynard, 2000). In both articles, they did not mention any technique to over these issues or any limitations of using translators. Moreover, group composition was different in both articles Salim et al. (2016) used a large group size compared to Bollini et al. (2007). None of them explained the reason for group size but Bourne and Naomi (2021) also used small group size for student feedback research and highlighted that small group formation worked best. It gives more space, confidence and comfort to the participants to actively participate and generate

dynamic discussion. Moreover, focus group techniques depend on various factors like local context, political/global environment, location, age, and discussion time including the nature of the research topic. Bourne and Naomi (2021) used activity-oriented questions to engage students and stimulate their interest in the discussion. This fun strategy is best used with youth. Also, they formed groups with students from different departments to gather their views on feedback in higher education. Whereas Bollini et al. (2007) conducted focus groups with different populations separately to compare the perspectives and experiences in access to the healthcare system between Turkish, Portuguese, and Swiss pregnant women. There are no set standards for conducting in-depth focus groups, but researchers need to carefully consider focus group techniques, group composition, size, target population, time, and location by the research topic.

A study conducted in Pakistan used focus group discussions (FGDs) on health awareness to improve infant mortality, engaging mothers and pregnant women in the discussion. The FGDs help to understand the care-seeking behavior of the local people towards professional maternal and newborn care instead of traditional healthcare practices. The discussion was conducted in the local language for an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and to ensure their full engagement in the discussion (Hureem & Davis, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This strategic tool (FDGs) helps to understand the differences, and conflict, between individuals and groups and support for groups/communities as well. A successful focus group minimizes the power gap between the researcher and the participants; they generate in-depth group discussion on the researched/study topic together. It considers everyone a participant; the researcher and the people being researched. It's a performative method where the research's actions become part of the research, knowledge production not just reporting the data. This dynamic and in-depth method brings people together in a specific setting and generates ideas and concepts through discussions that lead to the production of critical knowledge. This creative process of knowledge production is conceived as a critical methodology in human geography and other social sciences because the knowledge is produced through collective group discussion.

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