

IN WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES WOULD ONE CONSIDER EMPLOYING THE FOCUS GROUP AS A RESEARCH METHOD?

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, focus group has resurfaced as an acceptable method for gathering qualitative data in social sciences, especially among sociologists, and across a wide range of academic/applied social research areas. Focus group for long has served as a form of qualitative research, whereby a group of selected individuals are asked structured questions regarding several areas like personal views, personal experiences, ideas, and behaviours towards specific products or services. Focus group questions are usually asked in an interactive group scenario where participants are allowed and given the freedom to communicate openly with other fellow participants. Analysis of focus group information brings both dispute and changes when compared to other types of qualitative data. However, there are certain situations where focus group as a research method is best suited for due to its nature and this is what this paper will attempt to explore.

Keywords: *Qualitative research, focus group, participants, research methods, mode*

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INTRODUCTION

Focus group is a method developed in the 1940s in Columbia University by sociologist Robert Merton and his colleagues as part of a sociological technique. This was used as a method for measuring audience reaction to radio programmes (MacGregor and Morrison, 1995). In fact, the method was exclusively tailored and modified in different branches of social sciences namely anthropology (Wilson and Wilson, 1945), sociology (Merton and Kendall, 1946), psychology (Bogardus, 1926), education (Edminton, 1944) and advertising (Smith, 1954). It basically emerged as an alternative method that was more cost effective and less time consuming, and could as well, generate a large amount of information in a short time span. Another argument given in its favour was that group dynamics play a positive role in generating data which an individual would be hesitant to share when spoken to alone (Morgan and Krueger, 1997).

A focus group is a very resourceful and active technique of collecting data's/information from a representative group of respondents (Patton, 2005). Focus group method usually requires a moderator who manoeuvres the conversation on the subject under study. There are a group of appropriate and qualified chosen respondents who are purposely invited and assembled at a neutral location. The moderator starts the conversation and then the group

carries it forward by holding a decisive and an interactive conversation. The method is comprehensively used and at the same time also criticized. Although one school of thought places group dynamics at an essential and significant position, another considers its involvement as detrimental (Burns & Bush, 2006).

Focus group as a research method is also understood as an initiative to bring collectively a group of individuals with familiar interest and to perform a type of joint and shared interview (Gibbs, 1997). Conversation between members may cause an exchange of individual perspectives and exposures giving information and insight less expected to be seen when conducting a one-to-one interview. Although not giving much in the approach of quantifiable data, such groups can present priceless and important insights into topic and may also create a preliminary point for research into a precise subject area (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The question of where focus group can be employed in research method is broad with several examples to note and this will be discussed below in detail.

Indeed, focus group can be employed in several circumstances; for instance, in circumstances where political parties are interested in knowing or having more in-depth data on public judgment than that

provided by opinion polls. According to Bryman (2001), focus group is 'a form of group interview in which: - there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the modulation is on communication inside the group and the combined erection of meaning. Furthermore, Bryman (2001) believes that the focus group fits well with aspects of symbolic interactionist theory and that focus group is a method which often leads to greater probing of 'why people feel the way they do' than is achieved by the individual interview. This is because it 'offers the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individual's collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meaning around it'. David Morgan (2006; 2010) suggests that it can be useful to employ this research method with groups of individuals who have a shared interest or area of expertise. They can then stimulate each other to continue the conversation, meaning that intervention by the interviewer is minimized and the research becomes genuinely unstructured (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008).

Similarly, Wilkinson (2004) argues that: -focus groups are more 'naturalistic' – closer to real social life than one-to-one interviews; and can be employed in circumstances where the interviewer wish to get used to the normal, everyday way of talking to members of groups who may talk very differently from themselves. Wilkinson (2004) added that some feminist believe that focus group are more unrestricted than one-to-one interviews as they are less dominated by the interviewer and therefore more in keeping with feminist ethics. Wilkinson concludes that: "focus group are a method of choice when the objective of the research is primarily to study talk, either conceptualized as a 'window' on participants' lives or their underlying beliefs and opinions, or as constituting a social context in its own right, open to direct observation". Nevertheless, Wilkinson considers focus groups to be less helpful for making systematic comparisons between social groups (Wilkinson, 2004).

KEY ELEMENTS OF A FOCUS GROUP:

There are certain typical requirements for a favourable discussion. These need to be realized and appreciated in order to get significant and usable outputs from the technique and these elements will help us to understand when to consider employing focus group as a research method.

Size: The magnitude of the group is tremendously important and should not be too large or too small. Fern (1983) stated that as each participant is supposed to contribute significantly to the conversation; if the size of the group is too large) then contribution by the participants might not be the best. In other for focus group to be employed in research methods that will be beneficial, the group size must be perfect and must be the recommended size. Therefore, a perfect focus group discussion will consist of about 8 to 12 participants. Less than eight would not produce all the likely, achievable views on the subject and the group dynamics required for a meaningful session (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011)

Nature: The nature of focus group makes it suitable to be employed in certain research. For instance, its best for people who are from a related environment in terms of demographic and psychographic behaviour must be incorporated; otherwise the arguments might appear as an effect of other aspects rather than the one under study. For instance, a group of homemakers and working women talk about packaged food might not have a comparable outlook towards the item for consumption because they have different roles to control and balance, thus what is noticeable as ease by one is viewed as apathetic and careless manner towards one's family by the other. The other condition is that the respondents must be alike in terms of the subject/policy/product knowledge and experience with the product under study. Additionally, the participants should be cautiously screened to meet a certain criteria (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011).

Acquaintance: it has been established that getting to know each other in a group conversation may sometimes cause disturbance and hinders the free flow of the general conversation and it is understood that individuals disclose their viewpoint more liberally in the midst of outsiders rather than friends (Feldwick and Winstanley, 1986). Bristol (1999) found that men exposed more about themselves amongst strangers, whereas females were more relaxing amongst friends or rather people they previously know. Therefore, it is suggested that the group should comprise of unfamiliar persons rather than participants who know each other previously. Though, there are exceptions in certain cases (Rabiee, 2004; Hennink, 2007; Chawla and Sondhi, 2011)

Settings: For focus group to be employed as a research method, the setting has to be right. The external factors which might have an effect on the nature of the discussion are to be diminished. One of

these could be the room setting in which the discussion takes place. Hence, it should be as neutral, casual and comfortable as possible. Even in settings that have cameras installed, need to ensure that these devices are as inconspicuously positioned as possible (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011)

Time period: The manner of the conversation and communication should be carried out in a single location except there is a before and after plan which needs group insights, primarily before the study variable is initiated; and later in order to determine the group's response. The ideal time period the discussion will take should not go above one and a half hour. This is typically preceded by a short get to know each other formation session between the moderator and the group members (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011).

The recording: Recording focus group is vital in modern research methods. In the past people will sit in the discussion room to record conversation but in recent times, cameras, video and audio recorders/devices are now employed to record discussion. Thereafter, the device will be replayed for transcribing. With this been noted, focus group is a suitable research method that can be employed when the researchers intends to record the group conversations or reactions (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011).

The moderator: In focus group, the moderator is the key player as he's regarded as the conductor of the entire session. The nature, content and validity of the data collected are reliant to a great degree on the expertises of the moderator. The moderator can act as a participant where he might be a part of the group conversation or act as a non-participant and has the duty to develop new topic for discussion, initiate discussion and guide the discussion forward (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011). Morgan and Thomas (1996) have stated that any group task has two apparent outlines. One is the conscious plan to complete the evident task and the second, more vital plan, is connected to the unconscious. This is concerned with the disturbing needs of the group and has been described differently as 'group mind', 'group as a whole' and 'group as a group'. The moderator is obviously accountable for this as he needs to work with the group as a group in order to increase the group performance. There is no external indicator, so he needs to be satisfactorily skilled and familiar with the subject matter in order to comprehend the exact interval when all the possible viewpoints get exhausted and the discussion needs to move on

(Greenbaum, 2000; Morrison-Beedy, et al., 2001; Chawla and Sondhi, 2011).

CIRCUMSTANCES TO CONSIDER EMPLOYING FOCUS GROUP AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Consider employing focus group as a research method when the researcher wants to carry out an inexpensive and quick-time research. Focus group is not as expensive as other type of research methods to carry out but still entails planning, effort and resources like other research methods. Focus group often comes out to be less expensive because the research group tends to contribute an enormous amount of effort or the work is paid for from another source. If the group can get a member who can voluntarily direct the groups, evaluate the data, transcribe and organize prepare the information, then the cost will obviously be reduced in most aspects of the research. Qualified members of the focus group and staffs can actually contribute freely to reduce cost which is a great advantage (Morgan & Kruger, 1993).

Focus group can also be employed as a research method in circumstances where there is an influential differential between participants and decision makers. For instance, those who hold political positions of authority and influence usually need to get comments and responses from those with no political power (Shore, et.al, 2009). Usual means of discussion and acquaintance are mostly not in place and most likely these high popular figures are not easily accessible and when the people with no power have information to transmit that is impossible, frustration can arise causing the circumstances to be uncomfortable. The communication that focus groups attract is very useful and valuable in these situations because it permits groups of individuals to freely speak out and express their mind. Focus group is a genuine way of giving participants the opportunity to feel safe among others who share their opinions, knowledge and experiences together and in the same place (Marturano & Gosling, 2007). Therefore, focus group discussion, when carried out in a conducive suitable and accommodating surroundings, are particularly helpful and valuable when working with different people who have traditionally had restricted power and influence. This consists of people of colour as well as those with inadequate income or uneducated (Morgan and Kruger, 1993)

Focus group should be employed when there is a gap between professionals and their target audiences

(Morgan and Kruger, 1993). Gaps do exist between professionals and target group in a research and such gaps can be as a result of language barriers, different cultural background or spiritual faith. For instance, the professionals taking part in the research may be policy makers, educationist, and leaders in multi national organization. Many professional organizations and their representatives are sometimes, in some occasions, experiencing catastrophe and loss of money because their language and logic are too different and isolated from the people they are making effort to provide their services to. Medical professionals, engineers, university and college lecturers, school tutors, home planners/designers, business personnel's, lawyers, manufacturers, actors and actresses and lots of highly skilled professionals have all looked for a better more convenient method of accepting reality that may be significantly dissimilar from the people they are demanding to get access to. Since the discussions in focus groups give a lucid analysis of how other people around us feel, believe and speak, they are influential ways of revealing professionals to the actuality of the clients, student, or service users. Furthermore, these highly skilled workers work in collaboration with research teams to set question for group discussion, meaning, they can get instant and clear criticisms, response and complains about how other participants react to their own perspectives. The benefits that focus groups gives for bridging such gaps help to give explanation to their reputation in otherwise varied functions such as showing producers how customers react to their products, assisting survey researcher's find suitable questionnaire topics and wording, and giving public health workers new methods into encouraging healthy lifestyles (Morgan and Kruger, 1993).

A researcher can employ focus groups when examining complex behaviour and Motivations. It can be unsafe to generalize human motivation. Participant's points of view during the focus group session can be compared and researchers will be able to observe, examine and measure participant motivation with an extent of complexity that is characteristically not seen when employing other methods. When the goal is to change behaviour that relies on intricate information flow or a combination of behaviours, knowledge and understanding, and life history, then focus groups can offer the researcher with a technique that is exceptionally right for the task. Of course, the purpose of understanding complex behaviour often needs more than one way of finding out about that behaviour, so focus groups for this reason will normally be used alongside with

observation, secondary data, and other sources (Morgan and Kruger, 1993). One of the most common examples of using focus groups to understand complex motivations is when people do not have easily accessible ways of talking about a research topic (Gill et al., 2008).

Generally, people are not capable of articulating their motivations, feelings, behaviours, and belief. Many of the behaviours the researcher will desire to know are not issues of conscious significance to research participants. At the commencement of a focus group, such focus group member will not be instantaneously able to articulate all their feelings or motivations on a topic. As they listen to others speak, however, they can effortlessly recognize the point to which what they are listening to suit their circumstances. By evaluating and balancing, they can become more clear and sure about their own views. Also, as the participants articulate their own feelings and experiences, they will soon discover that responding to questions from the moderator and other participants make them knowledgeable of things that they had no idea about before. As a result, the discussions in focus groups frequently construct an observable fact that has the possibility for getting more information than other methods (Morgan and Kruger, 1993).

Focus group should be employed when carrying out a friendly research that is respectful and not condescending to the specific target audience. Focus groups have a distinctive position for finding information as anxiety and pressure between conflicting members begin to mount. Other research methods use in retrieving information may be useless because neither party trust the other's aim. By forming and keeping an environment that encourages significant communication, focus groups express a humane understanding, a motivation and enthusiasm to pay attention without being distrustful, and a respect for contrasting visions that is distinctive and valuable in these sensitively stimulating setting (Krueger and Casey, 2002). Logically, when the nervousness is too much, it is not likely that focus groups or any other method will work satisfactorily. Even in circumstances that are not loaded with disagreements, the sociability of focus groups can be a main benefit. This sociability involves both the participants, who normally take pleasure in their discussions mutually, and to the end users of the research, who thinks that they get a much enhanced perceptive of others' points of view during paying attention to their discussions. From the researcher's own perception, a flourishing focus group project can

help to establish human relationship between those who commission a project and those who take the role of the subjects of their research. Irrespective of the usefulness of the research process, it is a valuable end in itself (Morgan and Kruger, 1993).

Focus group can also be employed as a research method in circumstance where the researcher intends to learn more about the degree of consensus on a specific topic. Over and over again, the most essential part of a research aim is to study in-depth about the variety of judgments or knowledge that individuals have. Focus group has a solid plus here because the discussion in the group can make available an unambiguous foundation for discovering this issue. Obviously, the extent of consensus in the group can only turn out to be open to observation if the researchers make it apparent that they want to listen to different views, so one should certainly not mistake the failure to disagree for the real existence of consensus (Morgan and Kruger, 1993).

Apart from the above mentioned circumstances that focus group can be employed in a research, focus group can also be employed in circumstances where:

The researchers need to explore multiple topics: Some other research methods have restricted number and type of questions asked; however, focus group stands out as the group queries are open-ended and interactive, and makes it possible for unlimited number of question to be asked and countless variables to be explored. Since it is open and investigative in nature, focus group inspire discussions about ideas not expected, or themes not incorporated in the discussion manual that the moderator uses to conduct the group. In summary, focus group is suitable when exploring a large amount of issues/variables (Crandall, 1999; Schurink and Auriacombe, 2010).

The dynamics of a group would best bring out participants opinion: The saying ‘strength in number’ is likewise relevant to focus groups. When given the opportunity to unreservedly look for information, a group of participants build on other participant’s opinions. Through such conversations, groups regularly build up innovative way out and arrive at agreement on subject matters. Moreover, the group dynamics permits viewers to analyze the tacit language; that is, how most of focus group members act in response to their understanding of the subject matter and there concepts through their body language, facial expressions, or even their quietness (Crandall, 1999).

You want to know service users feedback to a particular topic (such as services, etc): The focus-group scenario allows eyewitness to watch and listen to the group conversations through certain devices such as a two-way mirror or through small screen monitors in a nearby room. This makes it very interesting as this is a very powerful way of really seeing and hearing what others truly thinks about the service you or your company render to the public. In addition, groups are usually recorded with video tapes in modern focus group meetings which then allow witnesses and others to watch, review or transcribe thereafter (Sim, 1998; Crandall, 1999).

You want to immediately get an outcome: Employ focus groups in circumstances when you want to see and hear immediate response, get outcomes right away, before collecting written report as previously mentioned above. A standard group, comprising of eight to ten participants and a moderator, lasts just about one and one-half to two hours, revealing so much about consumer judgments and ideas in a little time frame (Crandall, 1999).

You want to develop a survey for subsequent quantitative research: In reality focus group discussion brings out and helps identify the most significant issues in the subject of discussion and because participants define these problems in their own language, the real discussion becomes a helpful practical tool in questionnaire design. Apart from exposing issues that should be explored more, the precise discussion also helps one to build survey questions using detailed insider terminology. Integrating such terminology into a survey helps participants comprehend more evidently what is being asked, reducing any possible misunderstanding (Crandall, 1999).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are several circumstances where researchers can consider employing focus group as a research method. It has elements that have to be considered before employing it as a research method. However, after putting those elements into consideration, focus group is a tremendous technique that can be employed as a research method for obtaining in-depth knowledge by listening to members of the group as they share and compare their opinions and gather information in a comparatively short period of time. This essay has therefore, explored all possible circumstances where researchers can consider employing focus group as a research method.

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