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FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION AS A METHOD OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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Abstract

The focus group taps into people's underlying assumptions and theoretical frame works. These are unstructured group interviews in which group leader actively encourage discussion among participants who have personal or professional experience with the topic being studied. The size of the group, group composition, recruiting the participants, moderator influence, total number of focus groups, conducting focus groups, recording and transcription etc. are the certain factors need to be taken into consideration while planning for conducting focus group discussions.

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest (Krueger, 1988). These are group discussions where the topic is supplied by the researcher; who often act as the moderator. Schitl (1996) "focus groups are unstructured group interviews in which group leader actively encourages discussion among participants who have personal or professional experience with the topic being studied.". It taps into people's underlying assumptions and theoretical frame works and draws out how and why they think as they do. The data generated by this method confront the researcher with the multi leveled and dynamic nature of people. It highlights their fluidity, understanding, deviations and contradictions. In focus group the emphasis is how individuals discuss certain issues as a member of group, rather than simply as individuals so that a respond to each other's views and build up a view out of interaction that takes place within the group. Following factors are to be taken into consideration while planning for conducting focus group discussion.

SIZE OF THE GROUP

There is no consensus among researchers about the ideal size for constituting a focus group. If groups are too small, the likelihood of a lively debate taking place will diminish, and intra group dynamics are likely to exercise a disproportionately large effect on their running and findings obtained. If groups are too large they can become unwieldy and problematic to manage. Frey and Montana (1995) is of the opinion that a group of 8 to10 participants will be ideal whereas Morgan (1997) goes for 6 to10 participants. Sometimes small groups work when there are time constraints and the amount of information that participants want to discuss is large. According to Morgan (1997) small groups work best when the participants are interested in the topic, respectful to each other and e-moderator wants to give them more time to talk. In small groups there is more room for disagreement and variation in opinions and viewpoints. It helps individuals particularly vulnerable ones or children feel included and supported. Large groups can be used when involvement with a topic is likely to be low or when the researcher wants to hear numerous suggestions.

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GROUP COMPOSITION

Other important question to consider when designing focus group research concern about who should actually take part in the discussions. Selection of participants will depend to some extent to the topic that has to be discussed. Whether to have segmentation or whether should go for pre existing groups or strangers as members are to be decided. Segmentation is controlling the group composition to match carefully chosen categories of participants. It is based on some criteria like age, gender, education, occupation or people with having certain experience. Many researcher believe that preexisting groups allows more free following conversations and also facilitate analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups (Morgan,1997). Now the question is whether to have an existing group or groups composed of people unfamiliar with one another, ideally complete strangers.

When it is an existing group some scholars opine that discussions will be more natural and participants will be willing to give voice to different opinions because they already know one another and are able to relate one another's comments to actual incidents which occur in their shared daily lives. Some argue for relative strangers since this will make the members feel that they are able to disclose their true attitude or opinions, without inhibition or undue influence from others in their group. Some times participants will 'hold back' or selective in their sharing because they know others in the group. On the other hand, over disclosure or disclosure of private or confidential information is another concern when acquaintances or friends are included in the same group. Homogeneity of background and experience is desirable amongst group members, since this facilitates focus and enables shared experiences to be explored during the group interviews. Further more, because of time and distance constraints, it would have been logistically challenging to organize focus groups consisting of complete strangers.

RECRUITING THE PARTICIPANTS

Research driven recruitment

The first recruitment technique, which can be called researcher driven recruitment, is perhaps the most common strategy for recruiting focus group participants. In this case, the researcher is solely or almost solely responsible for recruiting the research participants. The researcher must find a way to contact participants through telephone calls, emails, letters or personal contacts. Then communicate with them, and schedule the group meeting time and location.

Key informant recruitment

Key informant is a second strategy that can be used to recruit focus group participants for the research. Key informants may be institutional stakeholders who are invested in seeing the focus groups carried out, or individuals with strong connections to the community of interest. In either case, the key informants must support the research effort and subsequently choose to assist with participant recruitment. Key informants are often vital to the success of the research project, as without their support, recruiting participants for the study would be much more difficult, or even impossible under certain circumstances such as with hidden or hard to reach populations



Spontaneous recruitment

At times, focus groups may be unplanned and occur somewhat naturally as a result of several individuals offering to be interviewed at once. We call this type of recruitment as 'spontaneous recruitment.' It is especially likely to occur in settings where friends and colleagues move in and out of public spaces where interviews may occur.

MODERATOR INFLUENCE

The role of the moderator is crucial if group discussion is to be facilitated effectively, leading to good outcomes in terms of data disclosure and validity. He/she should be aware of and fully understand the issues. Further he/she should be objective, sympathetic but at the same assertive. But this should be intrusive and should be achieved with minimum intervention. Moderator interventions can be at times to start the group upon fresh set of ideas, or when the group is struggling in its discussions. Moderator can intervene when there is a need for clarifications or even responds to specific points that are of potential interest to the research questions but that are not picked up by other participants.

ASKING QUESTIONS

It is better to have some structure in the questions that are to be asked by the moderator. These can be guiding questions under some main headings. Early questions should be designed to generate initial reactions in a relatively open ended way. This will help the researcher to navigate the channel between on one side, addressing the research questions and ensuring comparability between sessions and on the other side allowing participants to raise issue they see as significant and in their own terms.

TOTAL NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS

To decide on the number of focus groups to be conducted in a research project when the moderator reaches the point that he or she is able to anticipate fairly accurate what the next group is going to say. Three or more is usually adequate, as more groups seldom provide new insights. It will also depend on the time and other resources available at researcher's disposal. Again the criteria of segmentation play a crucial role in the number so that it may adequately represent these segments. The final number of focus groups conducted should actually reflect the research plan, including which sub groups have been targeted. The more segmented the groups are the more groups will be necessary. For some topics, a large number of groups are needed so as to capture as much diversity in perspectives as possible. But more the number of groups more complex the analysis will become.

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

A suitable venue is required, which should be readily accessible to all participants and large enough to accommodate the group, yet it should be nonthreatening and familiar if possible. Where group work is based on existing friendship, it is advisable to make use of venue already in regular use for group meetings. Familiar surroundings can help allay any fears associated with the focus group exercise and can thus encourage additional disclosure. Researcher can use public facilities, community centers, libraries or schools. The help of key informants can be undertaken to identify location which



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should be quiet and private or semiprivate so that the participants would be more comfortable in sharing.

The participants have to be formally welcomed and moderator should thank them for their time. The researcher should introduce themselves and briefly describe the purpose of the focus group and the larger research project. They should be informed that the information would be recorded for transcription purposes only, and that all the names would be kept confidential. The roles of moderator and participants should be clearly discussed. Facilitator must explain the rules for participation. All members of groups should be allowed to participate equally and it should be mentioned that things would go more smoothly if only one person spoke at time. To start the discussion “a stimulus material” an image, game, or text can be given to pique the interest to the participants.

Carefully planned open ended questions, designed to bring the participants mentally to the time or location of interest. Sometimes during the discussion topics may emerge which we have not introduced because of these questions. Moderator has to thank the participants and also give out the contact information. Also encourage them to get in touch with us if they think of anything they have forgotten to say. Some snacks can be provided to the participants and some times small tokens can be given to the participants.

RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION

When there are several people it is difficult to write down not only what they said, but also who said it and how it was said. This would be extremely disruptive, so a good recording device is essential.

ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP DATA

The research design, purpose of the study, and nature of the report that research should produce are to be considered when decisions regarding how to analyze units. Segments of the discussions ranging from a phrase to several paragraphs can be assigned with codes based on emergent or priori themes, ie. on questions in the interview guide or existing literature. The same text segment may be assigned more than one code. This initial open coding will result in a list of themes, issues, accounts of behaviors, and opinions related to our different research topics. Based on this preliminary test of codes, we can conduct axial or pattern coding to examine the association between different priori and emergent categories. Finally through the process of constantly comparing these categories with each other, the different categories can further condensed into broad themes. While analyzing it is necessary to move between individual level of analysis and analysis of group as a whole. This will allow us to capture individual narratives and concerns, while also considering the interactions and dynamics between focus group participants.

ADVANTAGEOUS OF FOCUS GROUP

1. As focus groups concentrate unequivocally on a chosen issue, leading to the generation of insights not readily available from conventional group or individual interviews. They can also facilitate the disclosure and validation of group attitude and thinking, while generating a potentially large volume of data in a relatively short period of time.



2. Focus groups increase the sample size considerably than an in-depth interview without researcher expending additional interview time. Thus it is cost efficient, if one does not have to pay the participants or have to rent room space.
3. It can produce a breadth of information as well as concentrated data on a specific area of interest.
4. It gives opportunity to observe group dynamics and interaction processes that otherwise would have been invisible.
5. Group dynamics may embolden people to say things that may not have been disclosed in an individual interview.
6. The hallmark of focus group is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group because our attitudes and perceptions are developed in part by interaction with others.
7. Groups may encourage the verbalization of themes which can remain silenced in other research contexts as those issues can be shaped and developed with other people in the same position.
8. Focus approach offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view.
9. In focus group, individuals will often argue with each other and challenge each other's word. Thus we are able to get more realistic accounts of what people think, because they are forced to think about and possibly revise their views.
10. Focus groups allow people more time to reflect and recall experiences and something one person mentions can spur memories and opinions in others.
11. It can be combined successfully with other methods, in-depth interviews and observations.

LIMITATIONS OF FOCUS GROUP

1. Focus groups often set an unnatural setting for group interactions and fail to provide naturally occurring data that might be collected by participant observation. They also tend to yield less data than do one to one interviews, involving the same number of participants.
2. Some times there will be shift in the interview themes as participants direct the discussion in their own directions; ie. a power shift from moderator to participants.
3. The data generated by the discussions will be difficult to analyse.
Sometimes there won't be enough time for all the participants to share all details.
4. Focus groups are said to be difficult context for the low status participants, especially if they have to be in contact with other members after the discussion.
5. Often it is difficult to organize a focus group discussion.
6. The recordings generated are often time consuming to transcribe and analyses.
7. Participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than individual interviews.



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8. There are circumstances when focus groups may not be appropriate, because of their potential for causing discomfort among participants especially victims of some kind.

CONCLUSION

In research it can be used as a sole method of data collection, or can be combined with other qualitative or quantitative methods such as in depth interviews, observations and surveys. It is ideal for exploring social and communication issues, and examining the cultural construction of experience. Focus groups facilitate the disclosure and validation of group attitude and thinking. Group setting offered a secure space when the participants were unfamiliar with the researcher. Group may encourage the verbalization of themes which may remain silenced in other research contexts as those issues are shared and developed among groups. One problem is loss of control of moderator and more talkative participants may dominate conversations, causing others to lose interest. It can be used at any stage of research process. It can assist ongoing data collection and also serve as a tool to double check the accuracy of personally collected data.

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