Focus Groups
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- Focus group research involves organised discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic.
- Focus group interviewing is particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic.
- The benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation.
- Problems arise when attempting to identify the individual view from the group view, as well as in the practical arrangements for conducting focus groups.
- The role of the moderator is very significant. Good levels of group leadership and interpersonal skill are required to moderate a group successfully.

Focus groups are under-used in social research, although they have a long history in market research (Morgan 1988), and more recently in medical research (Powell & Single 1996). This *Update* examines the value of focus groups as a tool for social researchers and considers their potential and their limitations.

What are focus groups?

There are many definitions of a focus group in the literature, but features like organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994), collective activity (Powell et al 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger 1995) identify the contribution that focus groups make to social research.

Powell et al define a focus group as

a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research. (1996: 499)

Focus groups are a form of group interviewing but it is important to distinguish between the two. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups however rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher. (Morgan 1997: 12)

Hence the key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.

Merton and Kendall's (1946) influential article on the focused interview set the parameters for focus group development. This was in terms of ensuring that participants have a specific experience of or opinion about the topic under investigation; that an explicit interview guide is used; and that the subjective experiences of participants are explored in relation to predetermined research questions.

Why use focus groups and not other methods?

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys. These attitudes, feelings and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or its social setting, but are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails. Compared to individual interviews, which aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context. The individual interview is easier for the researcher to control than a focus group in which participants may take the initiative. Compared to observation, a focus group enables the researcher to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time. Observational methods tend to depend on waiting for things to happen, whereas the researcher follows an interview guide in a focus group. In this sense focus groups are not natural but organised events. Focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan & Kreuger 1993).

The role of focus groups

Focus groups can be used at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study (Kreuger 1988); during a study, perhaps to evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities (Race et al 1994); or after a programme has been completed, to assess its impact or to generate further avenues of research. They can be used either as a method in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for triangulation (Morgan 1988) and validity checking.

Focus groups can help to explore or generate hypotheses (Powell & Single 1996) and develop questions or concepts for questionnaires and interview guides (Hoppe et al 1995; Lankshear 1993). They are however limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample. Examples of research in which focus groups have been employed include developing HIV education in Zimbabwe (Munodawafa et al 1995), understanding how media messages are processed (Kitzinger 1994 & 1995), exploring people's fear of woodlands (Burgess 1996) and distance interviewing of family doctors (White & Thomson 1995).

Potential and limitations

Kitzinger (1994, 1995) argues that interaction is the crucial feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation. Interaction also enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.

Another benefit is that focus groups elicit information in a way which allows researchers to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it (Morgan 1988). As a result, the gap between what people say and what they do can be better understood (Lankshear 1993). If multiple understandings and meanings are revealed by participants, multiple explanations of their behaviour and attitudes will be more readily articulated.

The benefits to participants of focus group research should not be underestimated. The opportunity to be involved in decision making processes (Race et al 1994), to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers (Goss & Leinbach 1996) can be empowering for many participants. If a group works well, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit (Kitzinger 1995), rather than as individuals. Not everyone will experience these benefits, as focus groups can also be intimidating at times, especially for inarticulate or shy members. Hence focus groups are not empowering for all participants and other methods may offer more opportunities for participants. However if participants are actively involved in something which they feel will make a difference, and focus group research is often of an applied nature, empowerment can realistically be achieved.

Another advantage of focus groups to clients, users, participants or consumers is that they can become a forum for change (Race et al 1994), both during the focus group meeting itself and afterwards. For example, in research conducted by Goss & Leinbach (1996), the participants in the research experienced a sense of emancipation through speaking in public and by developing reciprocal relationships with the researchers. In another study (Smith et al 1995), patients in hospital were invited to give their views about services and to provide ideas about improvements. In this instance change occurred at the management level as a direct result of patients' input.

Although focus group research has many advantages, as with all research methods there are limitations. Some can be overcome by careful planning and moderating, but others are unavoidable and peculiar to this approach. The researcher, or moderator, for example, has less control over the data produced (Morgan 1988) than in either quantitative studies or one-to-one interviewing. The moderator has to allow participants to talk to each other, ask questions and express doubts and opinions, while

having very little control over the interaction other than generally keeping participants focused on the topic. By its nature focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.

It should not be assumed that the individuals in a focus group are expressing their own definitive individual view. They are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture, and so sometimes it may be difficult for the researcher to clearly identify an individual message. This too is a potential limitation of focus groups.

On a practical note, focus groups can be difficult to assemble. It may not be easy to get a representative sample and focus groups may discourage certain people from participating, for example those who are not very articulate or confident, and those who have communication problems or special needs. The method of focus group discussion may also discourage some people from trusting others with sensitive or personal information. In such cases personal interviews or the use of workbooks alongside focus groups may be a more suitable approach. Finally, focus groups are not fully confidential or anonymous, because the material is shared with the others in the group.

The practical organisation of focus groups

Organising focus group interviews usually requires more planning than other types of interviewing as getting people to group gatherings can be difficult and setting up appropriate venues with adequate recording facilities requires a lot of time.

The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten (MacIntosh 1993), but some researchers have used up to fifteen people (Goss & Leinbach 1996) or as few as four (Kitzinger 1995). Numbers of groups vary, some studies using only one meeting with each of several focus groups (Burgess 1996), others meeting the same group several times. Focus group sessions usually last from one to two hours. Neutral locations can be helpful for avoiding either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building (Powell & Single 1996). Otherwise the focus group meetings can be held in a variety of places, for example, people's homes, in rented facilities, or where the participants hold their regular meetings if they are a pre-existing group.

It is not always easy to identify the most appropriate participants for a focus group. If a group is too heterogeneous, whether in terms of gender or class, or in terms of professional and 'lay' perspectives, the differences between participants can make a considerable impact on their contributions. Alternatively, if a group is homogenous with regard to specific characteristics, diverse opinions and experiences may not be revealed. Participants need to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic, will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different (Morgan 1988).

Once the types of participant have been decided, locating them is the next challenge. Recruitment of participants can be time consuming, especially if the topic under consideration has no immediate benefits or attractions to participants. It is likely that people with specific interests will have to be recruited by word of mouth (Burgess 1996), through the use of key informants, by advertising or poster campaigns (Holbrook & Jackson 1996), or through existing social networks. Incentives, whether expenses, gift vouchers or presents, will usually need to be offered.

The role of moderator

Once a meeting has been arranged, the role of moderator or group facilitator becomes critical, especially in terms of providing clear explanations of the purpose of the group, helping people feel at ease, and facilitating interaction between group members.

During the meeting moderators will need to promote debate, perhaps by asking open questions. They may also need to challenge participants, especially to draw out people's differences, and tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion. Sometimes moderators will need to probe for details, or move things forward when the conversation is drifting or has reached a minor conclusion. Moderators also have to keep the session focused and so sometimes they may deliberately have to steer the conversation back on course. Moderators also have to ensure everyone participates and gets a chance to speak. At the same time moderators are encouraged not to show too much approval (Kreuger 1988), so as to avoid favouring particular participants. They must avoid giving personal opinions so as not to influence participants towards any particular position or opinion.

The role of the moderator is a demanding and challenging one, and moderators will need to possess good interpersonal skills and personal qualities, being good listeners, non-judgmental and adaptable. These qualities will promote the participants' trust in the moderator and increase the likelihood of open, interactive dialogue.

Finally, the degree of control and direction imposed by moderators will depend upon the goals of the research as well as on their preferred style. If two or more moderators are involved in the facilitation of a focus group, agreement needs to be reached as to how much input or direction each will give. It is recommended that one moderator facilitates and the other takes notes and checks the recording equipment during the meeting. There also needs to be consistency across focus groups, so careful preparation with regard to role and responsibilities is required.

Ethical issues

Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research (Homan 1991). For example, when selecting and involving participants, researchers must ensure that full information about the purpose and uses of participants' contributions is given. Being honest and keeping participants informed about the expectations of the group and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak is good practice. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. At the outset moderators will need to clarify that each participant's contributions will be shared with the others in the group as well as with the moderator. Participants need to be encouraged to keep confidential what they hear during the meeting and researchers have the responsibility to anonymise data from the group.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the main features of focus group research, paying particular attention to the benefits of interaction and group dynamics which only this method can offer. Practical considerations and the time it takes to conduct focus group research may discourage many from attempting to collect data using this method. Nevertheless those who participate in this kind of research often find the experience rewarding. The process of research can be more collaborative than other forms of study, and so focus group research can be an empowering process for participants, and an exciting challenge for social researchers wanting to gain a different perspective on their field of interest.

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