

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: A TOOL FOR QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

This article focused on to explore the concept, use, strengths and weakness of focus groups discussion. It also provides the ideas about searching qualitative information in field setting. This tool has the potential to become a central approach in sociological and educational research, whether focused on the pragmatic end of evaluation or the abstract goal of theory building. Moreover, focus group discussion is an efficient and effective way to gain insights into social process. During focus group discussion, the moderator facilitates all informants in active participation and dig out the richer information.

Keywords: Educational Research, Qualitative Research, FGD and Conduction Process

Conceptualizing Focus Group Discussion

Focus groups originated in American marketing. By the middle of the twentieth century, advertising companies were hiring marketing firms to survey the public in order to find out what kinds of products and services were most appealing. Focus groups gained popularity because they allowed participants to explain the reasons behind their reaction to products. It took a while for academic research to catch on to the usefulness of focus groups, and even when academia did begin to realize their potential; there was initially no standard methodology for gathering data. During the 1980s focus groups were used as a supplement to other methods. Information garnered from group interviews was used to construct surveys, or the focus groups would be considered as pilot interviews for a larger study with one-on-one interviews (Barnett, 2002). It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the social sciences recognized focus group interviews/ discussion as important data sources in them. On

the academic side, sociologist Robert K. Merton and associates wrote the seminal work on research-oriented focus group interview in 1956 (Patton, 2002).

A focus group discussion is a qualitative research tool originated in sociology and popular in business, marketing, and education (Sagoe, 2012). Focus group discussion is used to gather data, usually in the forms of opinions, from a selected group of people on a particular and pre-determined topic, e.g. consumer topic, political topic, educational topic etc. The purpose of the discussion is to introduce the ground realities. During discussion phase, the researcher encourages free discussion and promotes equal participation of all participants (Neville, 2007). Focus groups also provide a social context within which the phenomenon is experienced, and they display the way in which context can shape people's views, showing how data are generated through conversation with others (Ritchie, & Lewis, 2000).

The focus group discussion consists of six to twelve individuals those who have the common interests and groups homogeneity. It digs out the real feelings and issues that provide richer than personal interviews or surveys, because the dynamics of a group lead to more developed answers. Similarly, it also provides the additional non-verbal information (excitement, doubt, stress) that surveys cannot. Furthermore, Focus groups help us understand causality- why people behave as they do. "Knowing why helps us see how,"- how to design, re-design, refine our offerings (UWSBR, 2007). It is a small group discussion where usually involve 6-12 participants of same age, sex, interests groups for addressing a specific issues and problems. (Morgan, 2002). Focus groups require skilled facilitators or moderators to guide the discussion and maintain the focus. The moderator needs to establish rapport immediately by thanking the participants for coming. A crucial step in the research process is to get the participants to sign consent forms before the focus group begins. The moderator needs to explain that the notes and audiotapes will be kept completely confidential and that pseudonyms will be used in place of real names (Patton, 2002). In addition, it should be stressed that no other personally identifying information will be used.

A focus group interview/discussion is the process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people. The researcher asks a small number of general questions and elicits responses from all individuals in the group. Focus groups are advantageous when

the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other. They are also useful when the time to collect information is limited and individuals are hesitant to provide information (Creswell, 2012). Focus group discussion is characterized by a non-directive style of interviewing, encouraging a variety of viewpoints on the topic in focus for a group. A focus group discussion is a formal, facilitated discussion on a specific topic. Focus group discussion is useful for identifying the knowledge, ideas, values, beliefs, and attitudes of the group (Ennew, Abebe, Bangyai, Parichart, Kjørholt & Noonsup, 2009). Likewise, the groups are used where the group process will itself illuminate the research issue. They are sometimes described as a more naturalistic research setting than in-depth interviews but as the setting will generally have been engineered solely for the purposes of the study, the degree of naturalism should not be exaggerated. But they do provide a social context for research, and thus an opportunity to explore how people think and talk about a topic, how their ideas are shaped, generated or moderated through conversation with others (Ritchie & Lewis, 2000).

Group size

The group size influences the group discussion process and its results. Several scholars advocate the variety of number in a group but they agree in a point that the group have not too small and large number of informants. Focus group discussions involve several - usually somewhere between four and ten - respondents brought together to discuss the research topic as a group (Ritchie & Lewis, 2000) but Morgan (2002) highlights the six to twelve participants in a groups. However, it can be say that the appropriate size will need for adequate information. If the group size is large, it is difficult to handle the discussion and if the is to be small, the discussion cannot meet the research purposes (Creswell, 2012).

Strengths of Focus Groups Discussion

The focus group discussion helps participants to agree or disagree with each other in specific issues that provide an insight of a person and how group thinks about an issue. It also explores the opinion, ideas and values of informants' in particular social groups. In bridging research and policy, it is useful in providing an insight of different opinions to the upcoming situations. Similarly, the focus groups can produce valuable information that is not

likely to come from a personal interview or a survey etc (Sagoe, 2012). In focus group discussion, the data collection is cost-effective. In one hour, we can gather information from several people instead of only one. Likewise, interactions among participants enhance data quality. Participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other, which weeds out false or extreme views (Krueger, 2000 cited in Patton, 2002). The Responses can be clarified and expanded upon with probing follow-up questions. In focus group discussion, non-verbal responses can be recorded and interpreted and group members can react to and build upon each other's responses to produce information or ideas that they might not think of on their own. The focus groups can be a natural forum for new ideas. It provides rich data through direct interaction between researcher and participants and help people build new connections. People are naturally interacted and are influenced by others. It provides data more quickly and at lower cost (Patton, 2002).

In focus group discussion, the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, share view of great diversity of views can be quickly assessed (Patton, 2002). It uses fewer resources (time and money) than interviews, large surveys, and questionnaire. Generally, it requires less preparation and is comparatively easy to conduct. The researcher can interact directly with respondents and can gain information from non-verbal responses to supplement verbal responses. The results are easy to understand and more accessible to lay audiences or decision-makers. It enables in-depth discussions and involves a relatively small number of people. It is focused on a specific area of interest that allows participants to discuss the topic in detail. Interaction is a unique feature of the focus group discussion. Indeed, this characteristic distinguishes the method from the individual in-depth interview. It is based on the idea that group processes assist people to explore and clarify their points of view. Such processes tend to be less accessible in an individual interview. A moderator, who is often also the researcher, introduces the topic and assists the participants to discuss it, encouraging interaction, and guiding the conversation. The moderator plays a major role in obtaining good and accurate information from the focus groups. There can be more than one moderator facilitating and moderating in one focus group.

Weakness of Focus Group Discussion

It is not appropriate in all contexts and cannot reach the deeper level of problems in all situations. The moderator neutrality influences the credibility of information and often biased (Sagoe, 2012). The controversial and highly personal issues are poor topics for focus groups (Kaplowitz, 2000 cited in Patton, 2002). This type of topic cannot provide adequate information for research purpose. The focus group discussion's findings may not represent the views of larger segments of the population and the small size of a focus group does not allow statistically significant generalization of responses to a larger population. The focus group members may be difficult to recruit because the member should be homogenous. In focus group discussion, various types of responses occur. Therefore, these open-ended responses may be difficult to group into categories. It requires good facilitation skills, including ability to handle various roles people may play so it is difficult to find the good moderator to conduct the focus group discussion. The small numbers and convenience sampling severely limit ability to generalize to larger populations (Patton, 2002). It requires carefully trained interviewer who is knowledgeable about group dynamics. Moderator may knowingly or unknowingly bias results by providing cues about what types of responses are desirable. The uncertainty about accuracy of what participants say is the major problems to conduct the focus group discussion. Due to these several limitations, the results may be biased by presence of a very dominant or opinionated member; more reserved members may be hesitant to talk.

The focus group discussion is beneficial for identification of major themes but not so much for the microanalysis of subtle differences. The confidentiality cannot be assumed in focus group discussion. In discussion situation, those who realize that their viewpoint is a minority perspective may not be inclined to speak up and risk negative reactions (Patton, 2002).

Process to conduct focus group discussion

The focus group discussion can conduct in homogenous group of people. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) the researcher considers the following processes while conducting focus group discussion in qualitative inquiry.

1. Choose a room with few distractions; if possible, limit the size of the group to 8 or less participants; nametags are helpful
2. Pre test your questions; have only a few questions (maximum 4-5); start from more general toward specific questions
3. Questions may vary in their level of structure; from “what is your perspective on” to “what would you say are the two most useful.....”
4. Most important points need to be addressed early
5. Keep the discussion to less than 2 hours
6. Use flip charts to make recording process as open/visible as possible
7. Consider having tape recording or another researcher taking detailed process notes (if you want to capture comments verbatim)
8. In focus group discussion, the nominal, Delphi, role-playing, storytelling, drawing/visualizing, brainstorming methods can be used. Nominal Group Method combines discussion and consensus-based decision-making where participants both generate and evaluate their ideas after deciding on criteria. Delphi method is used for developing forecasts and is based on collective opinion of a group of people who are knowledgeable about a subject.

Application of Focus group discussion

The focus group discussion can be applied in different areas of problems on the basis of nature of data, subject matter and study population. It has also useful to gain the deeper level insight about the educational problems. The three application areas have presented the following table in detail.

Nature of Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To display and discuss differences within the group • For creative thinking and solutions • To display a social context - exploring how people talk about an issue • For generating data which is shaped by group interaction -refined and reflected
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Subject Matter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To tackle abstract and conceptual subjects where enabling or projective techniques are to be used. or in difficult or technical subjects where information is provided • For issues which would be illuminated by the display of social norms For sensitive issues For some sensitive issues, with careful group composition and handling
Study Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where participants are likely to be willing and able to travel to attend a group discussion • Where the population is geographically clustered • Where there is some shared background or relationship to the research topic • For participants who are unlikely to be inhibited by group setting

Source: Ritchie & Lewis, 2000

Conclusion

The focus group discussion is a most important tool for qualitative inquiry to rich the deeper level understanding about phenomena. It digs out the individual feelings, experiences, insights and understanding and helps to understand multiple realities of a problem. Moreover, It is suitable for obtaining cross checking information form informants that made the qualitative inquiry more trustworthiness and credible.

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