

Methodological Issues in the Use of Focus Group Discussion as a Data Collection Tool

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KEY WORDS Focus group discussion (FGD); methodology; critical; definitional; discourse.

ABSTRACT This paper discusses the use of FGD as a qualitative method in social science research. It analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of its use in research. However there are a number of methodological issues, which still need to be addressed so that we can further develop the method. There are only a few methodological studies evaluating the validity and reliability of the procedures. With the potential of FGD to enrich social science research, there is a need for social scientists to undertake experimental studies to evaluate the appropriateness or otherwise of FGD. Such a study will help to strengthen social science methodology. Unless this is done, indiscriminate use of focus groups will cause more harm than good.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of qualitative approaches in understanding social realities has been recognized by social scientists. This arose out of the need to question the adequacy of an exclusively quantitative approach in explaining changes in social and demographic phenomena. Various qualitative techniques include FGD, in-depth interviews, observation, case studies, and narratives. The most popular of these among Nigerian social scientists is the focus group discussion (FGD) and is being extensively used in social and behavioural research. Though the FGD is an established market research technique, its use in the social sciences is new, especially in Nigeria.

The various methods of qualitative research serve to investigate various aspects of community life from a different perspective. Each has its advantages and limitations when applied in particular circumstances. They produce different kinds of data and make different demands on subjects with respect to required levels of cooperation, disclosure by self-report and willingness to permit an investigator enter the community and observe them. Consideration for the ethics

of qualitative research raises a number of questions including that of informed consent.

What I intend to do in this paper is to review the FGD methodology, its potential use, strengths, weaknesses and highlight the methodological issues that need to be investigated in order to make use of the full potential of this promising method. There is need to investigate the factors that influence the outcome of a focus group discussion, and as such it is not methodologically advisable to use it alone.

DEFINITIONAL ASPECTS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

A focus group session is a discussion in which a small number of respondents usually between 6-12 members, under the guidance of a moderator, talk about topics that are believed to be of special importance to the investigator. In recent years, there has been a notable growth in the use of focus group session research to gain insight into the dynamic relationships of attitudes, opinions, motivations, concerns and problems related to current and projected human activity (McDonald, 1979; Cage, 1980; Calder, 1977). Focus group sessions are a qualitative research technique that is widely used in private industry where it is considered essential to understand the psychological and behavioural underpinnings of consumer behaviour and to identify ways and means to influence this behaviour.

Participants are chosen from some specific target groups whose opinions and ideas are germane to the investigation usually more than one group session is conducted to ensure adequate coverage. They capitalize on group dynamics and allow a small group of respondents to be guided by a skilled moderator into increasing levels of focus and depth on the key issues of a research topic (Feyisetan, 1994).

The discussion is the basis from which information is obtained. It is conducted as an open conversation in which each participant may comment, ask questions of other participants, or respond to comments by others. Interaction among the respondents is encouraged to stimulate in-depth discussion of various topics. In a study on the Girl-Child, for example, the topics under discussion included knowledge of, attitudes toward girl-child status and specific government programmes.

The FGD is basically a qualitative method in which the moderator with the help of predetermined guidelines, stimulates free discussion among the participants on the subject of the inquiry. The order in which the topics are covered is flexible but generally the discussion starts with more general issues and slowly flows into more specific ones. At the end, a few probing questions are asked to reveal more in-depth information or to clarify earlier statements or responses.

As a source of knowledge about determinants of behaviour, focus group sessions are helpful in answering questions of how and in particular why people behave as they do. Often obtaining this type of information involves probing into the consumer's subconscious, since a person's actual motivations and feelings are subliminal.

METHODOLOGY OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The participants are purposively chosen and it is recommended that they should be of the same sex, age range and socioeconomic background, with a trained person acting as moderator. If the topic is of sensitive type, the moderator should be of the same sex with the participants, it is also desirable that the participants should not know each other or the subject of the discussion in advance.

The session should be held in a natural setting and be conducted in a relaxed manner, with the full discussion tape-recorded. There should also be a note taker who though in the session, should not participate in the discussion. The note taker knows about the objectives and subject of inquiry and is expected to be well trained in observing and noting nonverbal group feedback, e.g. facial expression, side talks. He later trans-

lates the complete discussion based on notes and tapes. These serve as basic data for analysis.

The homogeneity of the group setting, and the open-ended nature of questions will encourage the participants to feel free from various constraints in which they are subject during individual interviews. It is believed that they express their views openly and spontaneously. The moderation helps the participants to interact and this interaction stimulates memories and feelings and thus leads to a full in-depth discussion of the topic of hand. These group dynamics distinguish FGD sessions from in-depth interviews (Suyono et al., 1981; Knodel & Pramnelrata, 1987).

To ensure that all topics of interest are discussed by the group, sessions proceed under the guidance of a moderator. The moderator introduces and directs the discussion of topics and encourages participation in the conversation. It is essential that the moderator introduces topics and guide the discussion in an unbiased manner.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS

Focus group session research has been used successfully in preliminary and on-going activities of commercial programmes. Social programmes can achieve greater time/cost efficiency through research that includes qualitative methods as an integral part of ongoing research efforts. This recognition is the outcome of a growing awareness among social scientists that exclusive reliance on statistical information, no matter how sophisticated in its mathematical elaboration, sometimes has yielded insufficient returns in terms of efforts invested to achieve socially desirable forms of behaviour. Less structured research methods are attempted because dynamic emotional processes which determine behaviour to such a large extent prove elusive when they are analyzed in an attempt to obtain rigidly measurable information.

Qualitative research methods are not considered a substitute for quantitative studies but as an important input to the letter and as a parallel source of distinct, rich and pertinent information. Since every research method obviously has its limitations and advantages, a multiple research

approach is more capable of disclosing diverse dimensions of behaviour (Folch-Lyon and Trost, 1981).

Members of the same cultural group have similar cognitive structures, similar perceptions of their social environment, and adhere to similar normative beliefs. In FGDs, the internalized influence of cultural factors and the value structures of the social group to which participants belong and on which they have modeled their perceptions are reinforced and manifest themselves readily. The group situation may also encourage participants to disclose behaviour and attitudes that they might not consciously reveal in an individual interview situation. This is because participants often feel more comfortable and secure in the company of people who share similar opinions, attitudes and behaviour.

Focus group session research does not seek to statistically quantify group norms, traits and characteristics but to expose the underlying attitudes and opinions. The quality of the response is important and the purpose is to detect directions of behaviour rather than magnitude. Therefore sessions are rigorous in the depth of the inquiry.

As a result of dynamic group interaction focus group discussion sessions offer a number of advantages. Given the proper environment, participants are less on guard against personal disclosures because the atmosphere is friendly, tolerant and permissive. Personal revelations are facilitated by other group members who support, comment or disagree as well as by the relative homogeneity of the group which acts as an encouragement for all to express strong opinions on ideas. The lively dialogue activates memories, feelings and experiences in a manner similar to the process of free association. The relatively free format of the FGD allows the moderator to pursue unexpected avenues which are relevant to the topic at hand but could not have been foreseen beforehand.

Just as there are strengths, so we have limitations of the technique. First, a group setting is not always ideal for encouraging free expression. Sometimes the group can inhibit discussion. Second, care must be taken in preparing transcripts from taped discussion. Chances of introducing error are particularly high if the interview has to be translated from the native language to the

language of the investigator. Third, the samples are small and purposively selected and therefore do not allow generalization to larger populations. The chances of introducing bias and subjectivity into the data interpretation are high. While the method can provide plausible insights and explanations, one should not extrapolate from focus group discussions to the distribution of responses in a population. This is not always followed. Merton (1987) has expressed the concern that focus group research is being misused as quick-and-easy claims for the validity of the research are not subjected to further quantitative test.

USES OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

This can be used as follows:

(a) *As a Preliminary Data Collection Method:*

It can be used as a primary data collection method for some topics that cannot be easily studied through quantitative methods. Focus group discussions are particularly suited to subjects that are of a sensitive or personal nature, e.g. sexual behaviour, abortion and FP practice.

(b) *As a Tool for Generation of Ideas:*

It could be used to find out what motivates people to use a specific health production service facility. Such background information can be critical to health planners who need to know how the population views various health issues. It can also be used to pinpoint problems and to generate idea for service delivery improvements.

(c) FGDs can be used to complement quantitative techniques, helping to provide answers to such questions as why? Or how? They can be used as a preliminary step, providing background information and to generate hypotheses for field-testing. They can also be used to refine a questionnaire and to ensure that the words and concepts correspond to those commonly used by the target group. They can also be used as a follow-up to a quantitative study, to explain, expand and illuminate quantitative data in order to gain some understanding about the reasons for certain findings. When used along side quantitative tools it can result in a much better understanding than either method used alone.

CRITICAL METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Social science researchers pay glowing tribute to the FGD, though there has not been any empirical backup and many basic questions remain unanswered. A number of methodological issues that effect the quality of FGD can be highlighted. These are highlighted in order to further develop the focus group method.

1. *Sample Size:* How many FGD sessions are needed to be reasonably sure that all aspects of an inquiry have been explored? What is the number of target groups needed and how many discussion sessions with each target group? A number of criteria can be used to create focus groups but little is known about the number of focus group sessions needed for each session. Common sense and financial resources are the only guiding principles. However what is needed is an investigation into this area which will permit the users of focus groups to make an informed decision on the optimal number of focus groups for their purposes. A related problem is the issue of selection of participants in a group session. Do we pick them randomly as far as they meet our criteria?

(2) Practical applications of FGD in rural areas meet a number of methodological issues that will need modification. One, should FGD participants know one another before hand? It is often suggested that FGD numbers should not know each other with the belief that this increases the likelihood that focus group members express themselves frankly. This is not practicable in the rural communities where there is primary relationship and people know each other.

Two, where women's movement is restricted affects the conduct of FGD. Women selected for the session feel it necessary to bring someone with them especially the younger women who are frequently accompanied by their children or mother-in-law in some countries. In addition, mothers are often required to leave the session room to attend to some urgent work, e.g. take care of crying baby, and subsequently come back. This interrupts the flow of the discussion and makes it harder for the respondents to follow. Space where FGD should be conducted is another problem in the rural areas.

Three, in some rural areas, the participants

may refuse the use of tape recorders. In such instances it is not possible to record the session and therefore reliance will be on notes. This can impede the analysis of the interview. In fact in some cases the respondents will give one sentence question.

(3) Homogeneity of the group can be a problem too the group may not be an enlightened one and hence may not follow the discussion or even respond to it. There is no one to give the lead even where the moderator has explained the question. Such a group may find it difficult to answer the question properly.

(4) The group setting of an FGD can have an effect in an individual member of the group. Thus the group interaction would own the risk of encouraging exaggeration on the part of those 'carried away' by a responsive audience. There can be boasting and an under- and overexaggeration. For example, the Abakaliki study on the girl-child marked a significant level of exaggeration and one-sentence answers.

Q: Your comment on the general situation of the girl-child in Abakaliki.

1st Girl: *Girls in this area are not treated well. People think that sending a girl to school will be a waste of time because they believe girls are only born to bear children....*

2nd Girl: *I support what she is saying*

3rd Girl: *Yes, I support.*

4th Girl: *We are also deprived the privilege to decide whom to marry. Our girls are being forced to marry at early age of our lives....*

5th Girl: *In my Community, a girl might be forced to marry even the day the child was born because some of them do believe that when a child is born that she has from birth the person to marry her.*

In another session of FGD with adult women, the following were recorded.

1st Women: *Not everybody is poor. Some still send their children to school. About my family, I will like my children to go to school but the money is not there. Now is not the time to ask your daughters to marry. If the child is not allowed to go to school, people will be talking about you....*

2nd Women: *The condition of the female children is that our people give birth to many children and as a result would cater for only the*

male children. The female ones are not regarded as being members of the family since they will marry out and live in another place. They will prefer to give the female children to the persons that would marry them to train....

3rd Women: *Our people don't have money to train their children. It is poverty.*

4th Women: *We are saying the same thing.*

5th Women: *Our view is still the same.*

6th Women: *We are saying the same thing.*

7th Women: *We are saying the same thing.*

8th Women: *We are saying the same thing.*

On the other hand, groups can inhibit individual articulation. There is the audience effect. There tends to be fewer idiosyncratic thoughts, more moderation in judgements, more common associations, more cautiousness and a general taking into account of the anticipated reaction of the audience (Deutsch, 1968).

Stycos (1981) has opined that group sessions can inhibit some respondents, draw out other and encourage exaggeration like in the Abakaliki study on the girl-child. Thus while we should not be surprised that group interviews produce results different from individual, interviews there are no grounds for assuming that the results are more valid. There is need for systematic evaluations effort. Otherwise a group interview is in some ways more productive, in others less productive, than an individual interview (Merton et al 1956). Research should be carried out on how the group situation serves to release the inhibition of some interviewees and to inhibit the responses of others. They concluded that it is not at all certain that the private interview is uniformly preferable to the group interviews.

5. The moderator is the most concerned person in the group to keep the group focused on the topic at hand, to encourage group members to speak freely, to ensure that no group member dominates etc. However not much is known about the effect of the moderator's style on the results of interviews. We need to ask: does an active moderator get more and better information than a quiet moderator? How does an argumentative moderator fair *via-a-vis* a polite friendly moderator? We need to examine the effect moderator style has on FGD results.

6. The issue of ideal number of respondents within a focus group has to be critically looked

into. The normal standard is between 8-12. What happens if a smaller group of 4-6 respondents. It will be interesting to compare results from groups of 8-12 and 4-6. Fean (1982) had observed that the number of ideas generated did not double as group size increased from 4-8 and that the ideas produced in a group were not necessarily superior in quality or different from those produced in individual interviews.

7. There is a more difficult problem associated with FGDs. Since there is less direction, fewer standard stimuli and more stress on spontaneous responses, a broader range of responses is expected than in survey interviews. But rarely are the responses counted. We rely on the judgement of the analyst concerning what is frequent or infrequent, meaningful or not meaningful, intense or weak. Obviously such words as "many", "few", "Some", and even terms such as "most" and "the majority" will greatly vary with the observer and effected by his or her biases. If a survey researcher reports that a number of respondents have positive attitudes and an accompanying table indicating these respondents as a fraction, conclusions can be drawn directly and easily; but in the case of a typical FGD, the best you can do is to look for the biases of the analysts and judge whether they would tend to inflate, deflate, or not affect the generalization in question. Even the use of Textbase Alpha has not solved this problem.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that the FGD have potentials as a complementary research tool to enrich social and behavioural research. I also called attention for the fact that its limitations need to be appreciated and its indiscriminate use be discouraged. More importantly 8 methodological issues in the use of an FGD are highlighted. There are hardly any methodological studies evaluating the trustworthiness and usefulness of the FGD procedure. I suggest that social scientists should carry out experimental studies to evaluate FGD and other qualitative approaches. The research agenda should include:

(A) how FGDs fare against other qualitative methods like in-depth interviews, case study etc.

- (B) how the findings of FGD research are influenced by the various procedural differences raised, examples: effect of group size, acquaintanceship and moderator.
- (C) devising new strategies on how to use FGD to better our understanding of social science phenomena in the social science world.
- (D) how many discussion groups are reasonable and how can the participants be selected.

Unless attention is paid to strengthening the methodology by undertaking evaluative studies, the present indiscriminate use of FGDs may cause more harm than benefit and may give results that are not scientifically sound.

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