

Focus Group Interview as a Tool for Qualitative Research: An Analysis

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Abstract

Focus group interview is one of the valuable tools for collecting qualitative data. In view of extensive literature on the subject, this paper examines the background, purpose, rationale, and various forms of focus groups to be used in qualitative research. Characteristics of moderator, major phases and criteria of successful focus groups have also been discussed. It is concluded that the focus groups, compared to other techniques, may yield shared understanding and several perspectives of a given topic if they are conducted by well-trained efficient researchers.

Keywords: Qualitative research; Data analysis; Research tool; Focus Group; Group composition

I. Introduction

Interview is “a specialized form of communication between people for a specific purpose associated with some agreed subject matter” (Anderson, 1990, p.222). As the purpose of the research interview is to obtain research-relevant information from the interviewee, it is centred on the evidence to be generated for achieving the research objectives of describing, predicting or explaining the phenomenon (Cohen & Manion, 2007). As compared to other techniques of data collection e.g. questionnaire, observation, etc., interview may serve as a rich source for exploring people’s inner feelings and attitudes. According to Wisker (2001), the use of interview is highly desirable for obtaining information based on i. emotions, feelings, experiences, ii. sensitive issues, and, iii. insider experience, privileged insights and experiences.

The technique of interview is of immense use and value in qualitative research studies since they emphasize the in-detail and holistic description of activity or situation. By definition, the qualitative research is designed to “investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations or materials” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p.380). Therefore, the qualitative interviews differ significantly from those used in quantitative research. The qualitative research interviews endeavor to appreciate the world from the respondents’ perspective and to explore the significance of people’s experiences (Kvale, 1996).

II. What is Focus Group Interview?

Focus group or focus group interview is a qualitative technique for data collection. A focus group is “a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic” (Anderson, 1990, p.241) According to Denscombe (2007, p.115), “focus group consists of a small group of people, usually between six and nine in number, who are brought together by a trained moderator (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic”. A focus group interview provides a setting for the relatively homogeneous group to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer.

Discussing the history of focus groups, Rice and Ezzy (1999) point out that Bogadus in 1926 initially explained group interviews in social science research. During the World War II, Merton also used focus groups as the means for analyzing people’s responses about war-related propaganda and the efficacy of the soldiers’ training contents. In 1950s, the market researchers began to use this technique to collect more accurate information about the consumer product preferences. (Anderson, 1990; Denscombe, 2007; Patton, 2002; Wisker, 2001). Since then, the use of focus groups spread extensively to social research. However, Rice and Ezzy (1999) maintain that in the period from 1950 to 1980 focus group practically vanished from the disciplines of social science. The major reason for this, Morgan (1997) argues, was the fact that this method was largely ignored by the original proponents and other researchers who favoured other techniques generally. However recently focus groups have become popular among the qualitative researchers in social sciences.

III. Characteristics of Focus Group Interview

According to Casey and Krueger (2000), focus group provides “a more natural environment than that of individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others- just as they are in real life” (p.11). The three distinctive characteristics of focus groups, identified by Denscombe (2007), are as follows:

- i. Prompt/Stimulus: The sessions usually revolve around a prompt, a trigger, some stimulus introduced by the moderator in order to focus the discussion.
- ii. Moderator-not a Neutral Person: There is less emphasis on the moderator to adopt a neutral role in the proceedings than is normally the case with other interview techniques.
- iii. Interaction within the Group: Interaction between group members is given a particular value rather than just gathering opinions of people. The collective view is given more importance than the aggregate view.

IV. The Purpose and Rationale

Focus group interview aims at collecting high-quality data in a social context (Patton, 2002), which primarily help understand a specific problem from the viewpoint of the participants of research (Khan & Manderson, 1992). The question as to why and when focus group interview should be used is very important. Firstly, focus group interview may be a valuable research instrument when the researcher lacks substantial information about the subjects. Focus group provides “a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of people in their own words” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p.140). Secondly, focus groups are predominantly beneficial when a researcher intends to find out the people’s understanding and

experiences about the issue and reasons behind their particular pattern of thinking. (Kitzinger, 1995). Thirdly, this method is suitable for examining sensitive issues e.g. AIDS and for getting information from very sensitive population. Fourthly, use of focus groups is common to give opportunity to marginalized segments of society e.g. minorities, women etc. for exposing their feelings about their needs and problems.

It is important to note that focus groups do not fit in with all the research goals and they may be found inappropriate for particular situations. Morgan (1997, p.17) suggests that “ the simplest test for whether the focus groups are appropriate for a research is to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest”. Morgan and Krueger (1993) emphasize that use of focus group is undesirable when i. a group discussion is inappropriate, ii. the subjects face problem in speaking about the topic, and iii. quantitative data is needed.

V. Use of Focus Group as A Method

According to Morgan (1997), focus groups may be used in three different ways:

- i. As Self-contained Method:** In this situation, they become chief source of data collection. The basic argument is given that focus group as opposed to individual interview reveals the participants’ practices and viewpoints that may not be accessed otherwise.
- ii. As Supplementary Source of Data:** They may be used to generate survey questionnaires, to develop a program or intervention or to validate the findings of quantitative research.
- iii. Use in Multi-method Studies:** They may be used effectively when several approaches such as in-depth interviews, participant observation are used to collect data. This is also known as triangulation.

VI. Characteristics of the Moderator

Since focus groups are “naturalistic rather than natural events and cannot and should not be left to chance and circumstance” (Bloor et al., 2001, p.57), moderator plays a critical role in organizing, conducting and controlling the focus group process. The experienced and skilled moderator ensures the quality of data generated through focus group interview. As suggested by various authors (e.g. Dawson et al, 1993, Morgan, 1997), a moderator needs to i. be non-judgmental about the responses from the participants. ii. respect the participants, iii. be open-minded, iv. have adequate knowledge about the project, v. possess good listening skills, vi. have good leadership skills, vii. have good observation skills, viii. show patience and flexibility, and ix. be sensitive to the participants’ needs.

VII. Phases of Focus Group Interview

Major phases/ stages involved in focus group interview are as follows:

1. Planning the Focus Group

A number of points need to be considered at planning stage. The researcher must be clear about the objective of the focus group. The participants should be contacted in advance and be made aware of the objective of the activity. It is important to select the suitable class of the persons for the focus group. The interviewer is required to decide

who can provide the desired information. Sometimes one single group of individuals can provide the required data. However, the researcher should not be restricted to one target population when several may be related to the problem (Anderson, 1990). The time and location of the meeting should be decided keeping in view the convenience of the participants. It should also be ensured that the place is interference free.

Deciding what and how many questions are to be asked is very important for every interview. The questions may have both content and process functions. With regard to content, five or six questions are included in many focus groups but a lot of discussion can take place due to group process. Anderson (1990) gives some guidelines for constructing the questions for focus groups:

- i. Focus questions are always open ended,
- ii. Questions must be of “qualitative nature” and quantifiers e.g. as how much may be avoided.
- iii. Avoid questions that have a possible ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers,
- iv. Use of directive approach is avoided to know the reasons behind a particular standpoint or reaction of the participant’. Thus ‘why’ question is not generally asked.
- v. Large number of questions may be outlined through brainstorming, and then may be reduced to questions as desired.
- vi. The question should be sequenced in a natural flow.

2. Group Composition

As regards the characteristics of the participants, generally it is believed that participants may share some common characteristics so that interaction may happen to an optimum level and situations may be avoided where persons dominate or withdraw. However, there is division of opinion among the experts on whether homogeneous or heterogeneous group best serves the purpose of focus group interview. Some authors (Dawson et al, 1993; Morgan, 1997) argue that if the subjects belong to the same societal and cultural background e.g., age, sex, religion, socio-economic background, occupation, educational background, ethnicity etc., it will ensure the free flowing, open and sincere discussion among the participants. On the other hand, some authors (Anderson, 1990; Khan et al., 1991) are of the view that heterogeneous composition of the group works in a favorable way. In fact, the interviewer is required to ask him as to what nature of group—homogeneous or heterogeneous may best achieve the objectives of his research.

With little variations, many authors (Anderson, 1990; Denscombe, 2007; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) suggest that the size of the focus group should range from six (6) to twelve (12) participants. It is argued that if number is less than six (6), it is difficult to provide the synergy required. The information gained may not be rich and adequate enough and one or two persons may attempt to control the conversation. On the other hand, a group with more than twelve (12) participants is practically difficult to manage. The group may break into factions and participants may not find adequate opportunities to talk in a big group. However, mini-focus groups can be used when the topic needs to be explored in greater depth and where participants have long and substantial experiences to be shared with the group (Anderson, 1990).

Like other qualitative techniques, the members of the focus group are not selected randomly. Rather a purposive sampling method is normally used (Dawson et al, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Patton; 2002). The individuals who suit the topic/ problem under study are selected by the researcher. It is believed that the purposive sampling helps the researcher find the information-rich cases which may best produce the required data. To recruit the focus group participants, Krueger (1998) gives the following valuable suggestions:

- i. Random Telephone Screening: Subjects are randomly chosen from telephone directory.
- ii. Snowball: Members are requested to take a colleague to the interview session.
- iii. Piggyback: Members recommend other people who possess the required qualities.
- iv. Existing Lists: Lists of persons e.g. users of banking services are employed.
- v. On the Spot: Individuals at their places are accessed and asked to participate.

The question as to how many focus groups are needed to ensure the proper coverage of the topic is very important. In most of the situations, the saturation theory is applied. It means that researchers generally gather data until they get considerable new information. Anderson (1990) observes that the first two groups mostly give significant new information and conversation has mostly been exhausted when researcher gets into third or fourth session.

3. Conducting the Focus Group

Starting the session with some transitional period is highly desirable. At this stage, participants can be put at ease by serving them refreshment and engaging them in small talk. However, talking about the main issue of the focus group should be avoided. The moderator may start the formal group session by thanking the participants for coming and stating the purpose of the group briefly. They may also be informed about why they were selected for the interview. The moderator must emphasize the rules of confidentiality and invite them to ask questions if they want any.

As the process develops, the moderator introduces the questions one by one. To facilitate the interaction between the group members, he constantly provides probes and pauses, and involves people in discussion without expressing any value on the answers received (Anderson, 1990). Rice and Ezzy (1999) suggest that focus group may be held in mother tongue of the subjects. If the researcher and participants' languages are different, bilingual moderator or translator may be used. As a general guideline, average duration of a focus group is two hours (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). With exceptions, the focus group interviews are mostly conducted within one and half hour. In the end, the participants should be thanked by the moderator for their valuable contributions to the research. Anderson (1990) is of the view that providing summary of the discussion to the participants is not desirable because the achieving consensus is not the objective of focus group but exploring maximally the various perspectives held by participants.

4. Recording the Responses

For analysis of the data, it is important to record the discussion with accuracy. The participants' responses may be recorded generally in two ways: i. taking notes and ii. tape recording. Notes-taking is indispensable for any type of interview. Moderator or assistant moderator may record the discussions in written notes. The recorder must not give signals

to the group members about the worth of their opinions and must not note only the best comments (Anderson 1990). While taking notes, it is useful to write time references in the margin and to highlight or underline the particular significant points. Some people may use shorthand or codes.

In case of notes taking, there is possibility that note taker may not be able to record everything discussed within the group. Recording discussion by tape recorder is important and mostly suggested for all the focus groups (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). It is advised that an unobtrusive recording device should be used so that the group atmosphere may not be disturbed. The use of tape recording gives advantage of accessing full record of possibly rich source of data. On the limitation side, it is always time-consuming to listen to the tape. Taking written notes is equally useful even when discussion is recorded by tape recorder.

5. Data Analysis

The transcription of tapes is essential for data analysis. The process of data analysis must begin immediately after the group sessions end. Anderson (1990) has given some useful guidelines for data analysis. He is in favour of looking at first for big ideas and making list of them, considering words and context of their use, trying to examine the strength of the reactions/ feelings, and striking balance between detail and conciseness.

6. Reporting the Findings

Anderson (1990) observes that there are two major types of reporting focus group data: First, conducting analysis and reporting summary of the main ideas; second, giving the subject's words verbatim. Which approach is to be used depends on the researcher's purpose and intended readers. Anderson prefers combining narrative summaries with actual quotes that explain the participant's opinions in his or her own words.

VIII. Criteria for the Successful Focus Group

The focus groups are generally successful when they are consistent with the objectives of the research. However, Merton et al. (1990) identify the four criteria for judging the quality of the focus group, which include range, specificity, depth, and personal context. According to Krueger (1998), factors that determine the effectiveness of focus groups are: clarity of objective, suitable setting, adequate resources, appropriate subjects, skilled moderator, effective questions, and honouring the participants.

IX. Advantages and Limitations of Focus Group Interview

Gorman and Clayton (2005) identify several strengths of the focus group interviews. Rich qualitative data can be collected with reasonable speed since focus group sessions require only moderate time commitment from both participants and moderator. Depending on the number of questions and the complexity of the issues, between one to two hours are sufficient for most discussions. Participants can see at a glance what is being done, and almost invariably accept that the method is appropriate. Participants are encouraged to interact with each other and not merely respond to the moderator. In this way, the range and complexity of attitudes and beliefs can emerge. Focus groups offer an opportunity for immediate feedback or clarification on one's viewpoint, with the contributions of other group members. They enable researcher to take

into account not only what is said but also gestures, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication. Focus groups can allow a researcher to explore the unanticipated aspects of the problem under study.

There are a number of limitations associated with the focus group interview (Gorman & Clayton, 2005). It is considerably difficult to get the people together on time for the group session (Gibbs, 1997). A few vocal participants may dominate other members in the course of group discussion. Because of the nature of group conversation, some participants may conform to the responses of other participants, even though they may not agree. Sometimes it is very difficult for the researcher to find out the group with the required characteristics. The success of focus group is affected if the moderator is not skilled in managing the group interaction.

X. Conclusion

Focus groups are more than collection of individual interviews. The element of synergy and interaction between the group members play significant role in generating the data. Despite their few limitations, focus group interviews are valuable tools for collecting the qualitative data. They are much useful for the researches relating to planning, improvement and evaluation of certain programmes. When used by the trained and skilled researchers, they may yield efficiently valid and reliable qualitative data.

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