

## THE USE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH: SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

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During recent years, the importance of qualitative approaches in understanding social realities has been increasingly recognized by social scientists as well as by programme managers. Many researchers have started questioning the adequacy of an exclusively quantitative approach in explaining changes in the social and demographic situation. Among the various qualitative methods, "focus-group discussion" has become very popular and is being extensively used in social and behavioural research. While focus group is an established method in market research, its use in social science, demography or other related disciplines is rather new.

Following a brief description of the focus-group methodology, this article outlines the potential use of focus-group discussions, their strengths and weaknesses as well as methodological issues that still need to be investigated in order to make use of the full potential of this method. The conclusions call for more investigation into the factors that influence the outcome of a focus-group discussion, and warn against using focus groups as a stand-alone, rapid assessment method.

### What is a focus group?

A focus-group session is an in-depth discussion in which a small number of people (usually 8-12) from the target population, under the guidance of a facilitator (moderator) discuss topics of importance for a particular study/project. It 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 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 sometimes asked to reveal more in-depth information or to clarify earlier statements or responses.

Generally the participants are chosen purposively and it is recommended that they should be homogeneous with respect to characteristics which might otherwise impede the free flow of discussion. It is also considered desirable that the participants should not know each other or the subject of the discussion in advance.

The focus-group session should be held in a natural setting and be conducted in a relaxed manner. The full discussion is tape-recorded. Apart from the participants and moderator, a note taker also sits in the session but does 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, such as facial expressions. Later the note taker also transcribes the complete discussion based on notes and tapes. These transcripts then serve as basic data for analysis.

It is expected that the informal homogeneous group setting, and the open-ended nature of questions, will encourage the participants to feel free from various constraints to which they are subject during individual interviews. Thus it is believed that they express their views openly and spontaneously. The moderator helps the participants to interact and this interaction stimulates memories and feelings and thus leads to a full in-depth discussion of the topic at hand. These group dynamics distinguish focus-group sessions from individual in-depth interviews typical of ethnographic research.<sup>1</sup>

### How can focus groups be used?

Available literature shows that the focus-group approach, like some other qualitative methods, could effectively be used as follows.

#### • As an idea-generation tool

Focus-group discussions could, for example, be used by a health programme to find out what motivates people to use a specific health product or health-service facility, or to adopt better health-related practices. Such background information can be critical to health planners who need to know how the population views various health issues. In addition, focus-group discussions with health-care providers can be useful in pinpointing problems and in generating ideas for improvements in services.

#### • In conjunction with a quantitative study

Focus-group discussions are often used as a complement to a quantitative study, helping to answer such questions as "why?" or "how?", rather than "how many?". They can also 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.

Focus groups have also been used as a follow-up to a quantitative study, to explain, expand and illum-

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inate quantitative data, in order to gain some understanding about the reasons for certain findings.

In short, focus-group discussions, when used alongside quantitative studies, can result in a much greater understanding than either method used alone.

#### • As a primary data-collection method

Focus-group discussions can be used as a primary data-collection method for some topics that cannot easily be studied through quantitative methods. Focus-group discussions are particularly suited to subjects that are of a sensitive or personal nature; for example, Suyono et al. (1) covered abortion, and Kowaleski (2) covered sexual behaviour among gay men. Neither of the studies reported problems in discussing these rather sensitive topics. In fact, the former study in Indonesia found that participants were much more willing to discuss abortion in the focus-group discussion than they were in survey interviews. Group discussions suggested high awareness of abortion and different techniques for abortion, whereas sample-survey results indicated low awareness of abortion. The researchers concluded that survey interviews, which are usually watched by neighbours, are probably much less conducive to eliciting information about sensitive topics than are focus-group discussions which are away from home, among anonymous participants and in a supportive setting.

However, care must be taken to treat the results of focus-group interviews with some caution, since they can only suggest plausible answers, and cannot be indicative of the distribution of attitudes or beliefs in the population.

#### Strengths and limitations of focus-group interviews

The advantages of focus-group discussions have been discussed extensively in the literature (3-5, 6, 9). These advantages could briefly be summarized as follows.

Focus-group discussions offer many of the advantages of qualitative studies without requiring full-scale anthropological investigations. They provide a wealth of insight into motivation, attitudes, feelings and behaviour that cannot easily be obtained by quantitative methods alone. This is probably the reason why the focus-group discussion approach has become so popular in recent times.

The group setting is believed to be beneficial in many situations. An informal, supportive group of people with similar backgrounds can often put people at ease, and encourage them to express their views freely and frankly. It enables participants to elaborate on ideas, and the group interaction can stimulate memories and feelings. Because each participant is relating to a group of people with similar backgrounds, the likelihood of participants giving answers they think will please the interviewer (a common problem of surveys) is reduced. In addition, because of the interaction during focus-group discussion, the moderator has more of a chance to

clarify the questions, and there is less likelihood of questions being misunderstood. Finally, the relatively free format of the focus-group discussion allows the moderator to pursue unexpected avenues which are relevant to the topic at hand, but could not have been foreseen beforehand.

There are a number of limitations to focus-group discussions. Firstly, a group setting is not always ideal for encouraging free expression. Sometimes the group can inhibit discussion. For example, Vlassoff described a focus-group discussion amongst adolescent girls in India, during which the girls were painfully shy, not wishing to discuss their opinions in front of other people, despite extensive efforts to create a relaxed setting conducive to discussion.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, 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 (a problem which is significant in multilingual environments).

Focus-group discussions also have many of the limitations of other qualitative methods. Their samples are small and purposively selected and therefore do not allow generalization to larger populations. In addition, as with other qualitative methods, the chances of introducing bias and subjectivity into the interpretation of the data are high. Because of this, it is not appropriate to treat the findings from focus-group discussions as though they were findings from quantitative research. While the focus-group discussion can provide plausible insights and explanations, one should not extrapolate from focus-group discussions to the distribution of responses in a population. This tenet is not always followed. In fact Merton, one of the founders of focus-group discussions, recently expressed his concern that "focus-group research is being mercilessly misused as quick-and-easy claims for the validity of the research are not subjected to further, quantitative test" (6).

#### Methodological issues

Much has been written about the way to conduct focus-group interviews. However, this discussion has tended to be superficial, with little empirical backing and many basic questions remaining unanswered. This section discusses some key issues that still need to be addressed in order to further develop the focus-group method.

##### The number of focus-group discussion sessions

Little is known about how many discussion sessions are needed to be reasonably sure that all/most aspects related to the subject of inquiry have been explored.

Two aspects of this question need to be explored: the number of target groups needed and the number of discussion sessions with each target group. As discussed earlier, the population should be divided into homogeneous subgroups according to characteristics relevant to the research, such as users and non-users, males and females, working women and housewives, and geographical areas. This will enable the researcher to do a separate analysis for groups whose behaviour is different from one another. It will also help to create a supportive ambi-

<sup>8</sup> Fort, A. L. *The use of focus-group interviews in the investigation of fertility in Peru*. (Unpublished document).

<sup>9</sup> Vlassoff, C. *Contributions of the micro-approach to social sciences research*. Report prepared for IDRC, 1987.



ance for the discussion, as the group members will have some characteristics in common. In addition, participants should have similar socioeconomic status, and possibly educational backgrounds as well, so that they all feel on an equal footing in the discussion. Other criteria for creating separate focus groups might be cultural or religious differences, gender or age, or any other characteristic which is likely to stand in the way of free discussion.

Little is known about the number of focus-group sessions needed for each subgroup. Debus et al.<sup>1</sup> recommend doing at least two focus-group interviews with each subgroup, to compare the results. Textbooks in market research advocate forming additional groups until no new information comes to light. Even if only two interviews per target group are carried out, the number of interviews required may be large. For example, a study of attitudes towards contraceptives in India might easily require 24 interviews per geographical area since separate interviews would likely be required for males and females, for younger and older age groups, and for different caste groups (say three different castes). If more than one geographical area is included in the study, the number of sessions is multiplied accordingly.

For the time being, common sense and financial resources are the only guiding principles. However, this situation is far from ideal. What is needed is a methodical 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.

#### *Analysis of focus-group discussions*

Focus-group discussions provide a great deal of data, including interview notes and often transcripts of the session. This information needs to be analysed and organized in an understandable fashion. Content coding is often mentioned as the method of choice. This consists of listening or watching the tapes and reading the transcripts (if available) to generate a list of key ideas for each topic under discussion. Quotations and ideas are then placed under the appropriate categories, which can be divided into subcategories or combined into larger themes.

In order to see whether the transcripts are really necessary, and whether different researchers would come to the same conclusions from the same interviews, one of the authors (M. E. Khan) carried out a methodological experiment as part of a larger study. The larger study conducted in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Geneva, was to evaluate family-planning programmes at the workplace, using focus-group interviews as one of its tools. In this study all the sessions (7 in all) were both video- and audio-taped. Subsequently the videotapes along with written transcripts and objectives of the study were provided to seven different professionals, to go through the materials and analyse them to draw their own conclusions about the study.

Although the analysis is not yet final, initial observations suggest the following:

- Drawing conclusions from the videotape alone is difficult and time-consuming.
- Going through the transcripts is faster and easier.
- If conclusions are drawn only on the basis of seeing or listening to the tapes, there seems to be a certain amount of variation in drawing conclusions or picking up their expression.
- If transcripts are used for analysis, and content analysis is done properly (i.e. care is taken to note which views are expressed how many times and by how many participants), the answers or the conclusions drawn are fairly stable. Videotapes or observations of note takers add further stability to the interpretations.

#### *Practical applications in rural areas or urban slums*

It must be remembered that focus-group discussions were originally developed for market research in developed countries, where transport and communication are relatively advanced. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the methods for conducting focus-group discussions will need modification in the face of realities in developing country environments.

This section is based upon recent experience in applying focus-group interviews in rural areas and in urban slums of India.

In many instances it was not practical to follow the usual guidelines, and a number of methodological issues and problems came to light.

*Should focus-group members know one another beforehand?* It is usually recommended that focus groups consist of individuals who are not acquainted with one another. It is believed that this increases the likelihood that group members express themselves frankly. However, this is not a practical option in many rural villages or urban slums where it is generally very difficult to find people who are not acquainted with one another. Based on experience in carrying out focus-group discussions in India, we feel that for topics which are not sensitive, the type of informant does not make much difference, and the usual rule of anonymity can be relaxed. However, in the case of sensitive issues, participants who do not know one another provide better information than acquainted ones.

*Logistical problems in conducting focus-group interviews with women.* Focus group discussions usually last for one or two hours. Group members are expected to concentrate on the topics being discussed. Experience suggests that this is difficult for women in the Indian context (and perhaps in other societies where free movement of women is socially restricted). Often, the women selected for the session feel it necessary to bring someone with them, especially the younger women who are frequently accompanied by their mother-in-law or younger sister-in-law. In addition, mothers are often required to leave the room to attend to some urgent work (e.g. to take care of crying children) and subsequently come back. This interrupts the discussion, and makes it harder for respondents to follow. Availability of space where a focus group could be privately conducted is a serious problem in some rural areas and urban slums (unless the respondents are ready to come to a community centre such as a school or Panchayat hall). If the sessions are conducted in a private home, getting enough space and privacy might be problematic.

<sup>1</sup>Debus, M. et al. *Communication for child survival*. Handbook for excellence in focus-group research. Washington, D.C., Academy for Educational Development, 1988.



## RÉSUMÉ

## L'utilisation des groupes focaux en recherche sociale et comportementale: problèmes méthodologiques

L'une des méthodes qualitatives d'évaluation rapide est celle des groupes focaux. Le groupe focal est composé d'un petit nombre de personnes (en général 8-12) provenant de la population cible, qui se réunissent pour discuter de sujets présentant de l'importance pour une étude ou un projet. En général, les participants ne sont pas choisis au hasard et il est recommandé qu'ils constituent un ensemble homogène pour éviter que certaines de leurs caractéristiques individuelles ne gênent le libre cours de la discussion.

Les groupes focaux peuvent servir à faire naître les idées ou être utilisés conjointement avec une méthode quantitative, ou encore être un moyen de collecter des données primaires. Toutefois, dans le cas de cette dernière utilisation, il conviendra de traiter les résultats obtenus avec prudence.

Le principal avantage de la méthode des groupes focaux pour l'évaluation rapide est qu'elle apporte une information en profondeur sans qu'il soit besoin de se livrer à des recherches anthropologiques en vraie grandeur. Par son côté informel, le groupe focal est censé mettre à l'aise ceux qui en font partie et les encourager à s'exprimer en toute liberté. La méthode comporte cependant un certain nombre de limitations. Le groupe focal représente un petit échantillon, dont la sélection est orientée et qui, par conséquent, ne permet pas la généralisation à des populations plus importantes. En outre, comme c'est le cas des autres méthodes qualitatives, le risque est

considérable d'introduire un biais et de la subjectivité dans l'interprétation des données.

La méthode n'atteindra son plein développement que si l'on résout un certain nombre de questions méthodologiques. On ne sait guère combien de séances de discussion sont nécessaires pour être raisonnablement certain que la plupart des aspects du sujet traité ont été explorés. On ne voit pas non plus clairement quels sont les meilleurs moyens d'analyser les débats d'un groupe focal ni dans quelle mesure les résultats subissent l'influence des opinions et des préjugés de l'analyste.

La méthode des groupes focaux a été utilisée avec grand succès pour les études de marché dans les pays développés. Il va de soi que cette technique ne peut être adaptée aux zones rurales et aux quartiers urbains déshérités des pays en développement sans quelques changements de méthodologie. Les méthodes permettant d'assurer cette adaptation ne sont pas encore entièrement au point et il est nécessaire dans ce domaine important de procéder à des travaux exploratoires supplémentaires.

En conclusion, la méthode des groupes focaux peut apporter un enrichissement considérable à la recherche sociale et comportementale, mais il y aurait lieu de poursuivre les études méthodologiques expérimentales concernant son utilisation pour l'évaluation rapide.

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**Objections to tape recorder.** Another problem encountered was that some participants objected to the use of tape recorders. In such instances it was not possible to record the session, and therefore it was necessary to rely only on notes. This can impede the analysis of the interview.

**Homogeneity of the group.** Although at present intragroup homogeneity is emphasized, our own experience reveals that in some cases heterogeneity may also be useful. For example, in a focus-group session consisting of women of lower-middle reproductive age, initially we found it very difficult to stimulate discussion on the problems related to reproductive health. But after a while an older woman (mother-in-law of one of the participants) present in the group started talking. This stimulated the younger women who then came forward with very useful information.

**The role of the moderator.** The moderator is crucial in focus-group research. It is the job of the moderator to keep the group focused on the topic at hand, to encourage group members to speak freely, to ensure that no group member dominates the conversation and that all opinions are heard, to create a supportive atmosphere, to probe when necessary, and to listen well. However, not much is known about the effect of the moderator's style on the results of interviews. For example, does an active moderator get more and better information than a quiet, laid-back moderator?; does a challenging argumentative moderator evoke more or better responses than a polite friendly moderator? More experimentation is required with moderator style, in order to be able to make informed choices on this important issue.

**The ideal number of respondents within a focus group.** Usually a focus group has anywhere between 8 and 12 respondents. However, lately there has been an increasing trend to use minigroups with 4-6 respondents. It would be useful to compare results from both types of group. Some work on this topic has been done by Fern (7) who observed that the number of ideas generated did not double as group size increased from 4 to 8, and that the ideas produced in a group were not necessarily superior in quality to those produced in individual interviews.

## Conclusions

This article has shown that focus-group discussions have considerable potential to be used as a complementary approach to enrich social and behavioural research. However, its limitations need to be appreciated and its indiscriminate use should be discouraged. This article has also demonstrated that a number of methodological issues remain unanswered. There are hardly any methodological studies evaluating the trustworthiness and usefulness of the procedures. It is suggested that experimental studies should be undertaken to evaluate qualitative approaches, particularly how focus-groups fare against other qualitative methods, and how the findings of focus-group research are influenced by the various procedural differences raised above. It is also important to experiment in using the focus-group approach for rapid appraisal of health-promoting behaviours related to selected diseases. Unless attention is paid to strengthening the methodology by undertaking evaluative experimental studies, it is feared that the indiscriminate use of focus groups may cause more harm than benefit.

## SUMMARY

The use of focus groups as a qualitative method for rapid assessment is discussed. A focus-group session is an in-depth discussion in which a small number of people (usually 8-12) from the target population discuss topics that are of importance for a particular study or project. Generally the participants are chosen purposively, and it is recommended that they should be homogeneous with respect to characteristics which might otherwise impede the free flow of discussion.

Focus groups can be used for idea generation, in conjunction with a quantitative method, or as a primary data-collection method. However, if focus groups are used as a primary data-collection method, their results must be treated with caution.

The main advantage of using focus-group discussions during rapid assessment is that they provide in-depth information without requiring full-scale anthropological investigations. The informal group setting is believed to make people feel at ease, encouraging them to express their views freely. However, there are a number of limitations to focus-group discussions. The samples are small and purposively selected, and therefore do not allow generalization to larger populations. In addition, as with other qualitative methods, the chances of intro-

ducing bias and subjectivity into the interpretation of the data are high.

There are a number of methodological issues which still need to be addressed in order to further develop the method. Little is known about how many discussion sessions are needed to be reasonably sure that most aspects related to the subject of inquiry have been explored. The best way to analyse focus-group discussions, and the extent to which the results reflect the opinions and biases of the analyser, are not well understood.

Focus-group discussions have been used very successfully by market researchers in developed countries. Naturally, adapting this technique to rural and slum areas in developing countries will involve some changes in methodology. Methods of adapting focus-group discussions to rural and urban slum settings are still not fully worked out, and more exploratory work in this important area is required.

The conclusions indicate that focus-group discussions have considerable potential to enrich social and behavioural research, and suggest that more experimental methodological studies in using the focus-group approach for rapid assessment should be undertaken.