

Method Report: Group Methods – Focus Groups

In class, we talked about several group methods: Focus Groups, Fishbowls, Bar Camps, World Cafés, Breakout Sessions and Open Space. This report presents details and information on Focus Groups.

History

Focus groups can be traced back to *focused interviews* conducted by Lazarsfeld and colleagues with groups and individuals in the 1940s, researching the effects of mass communication (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994). It operates under constructivist and critical research paradigms. Both paradigms assume that there is no “single reality” – on the contrary, it is created by individuals and groups and we need to find the underlying meanings in acts and events, which is exactly what focus groups can be used for (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017).

When, Where & How to Use Focus Groups

In its early time as a method, approximately from 1950 to the 1980s, focus groups were mostly used in marketing research. As he researched propaganda and mass communication, Lazarsfeld’s research on mass communication was seen as essentially marketing research. Focus groups (re)gained usage and support in social sciences in the mid-1980s (Colucci 2007). Today they are used in a wide range of areas, to explore diverse kinds of issues. Colucci (2007) recounts “social sciences, (...) education, communication studies, political sciences, and public health” (p. 1423) as areas of research where focus groups have been used.

In order to have meaningful discussions and to make it possible for everyone to participate, a focus group should consist of about 6 to 12 persons (expert mini-focus groups can consist of 3-4 people). One session should last 1 to 2 hours (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009) “Overrecruiting” groups is actually recommended, as participants may not have time at the arranged date, or drop out of the study. Suggested overrecruiting rates range from 20% to 50% (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009).

According to Michael and Eva Dreher (in Flick et al. 1991), the quality of the data drawn from focus group hinges on (1) the composition of the group, (2) the skill of the moderator and (3) the significance the participants assign to the discussion.

Important criteria of group composition are that (1) all participants be affected by the topic discussed and (2) they share a contextual frame as well as norms. Examples for research listed by Dreher and Dreher include the working situation and future perspectives of bank clerks and the living environment of apprentices. Colucci’s (2007) work investigating the cultural meaning of youth suicide in university students in Italy, India, and Australia also fits this description.

The researchers' task when conducting focus group research is not to sit by and watch, but moderate the discussion, initiating it and keeping it going. As this may be hard with some people, Colucci proposes to use exercises (or "activity-oriented questions"). She has used this version of focus groups in her own research and reports that these exercises "can help focus the group's attention on the core study topic" and that they "can also be helpful with young people and to discuss sensitive topics." (p. 1422). Dreher and Dreher recommend to define some rules for a comfortable and productive discussion in advance, e.g. active listening, use of manual signaling, etc. In order for the moderator to be able to focus on the discussion, Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) recommend sharing some tasks with an assistant – especially the dealing with late arrivals, arranging for refreshments, etc.

Data Found in Focus Groups

Conducting focus groups produces various types of data: both researchers and participants might create sketches & notes that could be used in analysis; Audio/video recordings of the sessions might be produced. With the exercises suggested and described by Colucci (2007), even more diverse kinds of data may be collected. However, she warns that ratings, lists etc should not be used as sources for statistical analysis ("How many participants rated X as more important than Y?" etc), but rather as discussion prompts during the session(s). Flick (Chapter 5.6 in Flick et al. 1991) additionally suggests to ask participants to supplement researchers' notes with their own reflection, e.g. notes relating to the session(s).

Advantages and Disadvantages

In chapters 5.5 and 6.1.3 in Flick et al. (1991), Uwe Flick and Michael and Eva Dreher describe a specific advantage that group discussions have over qualitative Interviews, namely the dynamics of the discussion process. It may be possible that participants get "carried away" during the discussion: the participants might not control or even suppress actions in a group discussion in the same way as in an interview. Furthermore, Flick and Dreher and Dreher highlight the possibility of witnessing the evolution of group opinions during group discussions.

Dreher and Dreher also illustrate two points where researchers need to exercise caution when using group discussions: (1) a discussion of a group of persons concerned with a topic means to find out a lot about this group's reality – and at the same time is an issue of transferability. (2) The statements of the participants are always subjective constructions of meaning, which means that during analysis it is necessary to reconstruct embodied meanings and interpretations – with an appropriate amount of work. This may prove a balance difficult to find, as a lot of (meta) information can be gathered from a focus group session, as described by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009): "which

participants respond to each question, the order of responses, and the nature of the responses (e.g., non sequitur, rambling, focused) as well as the nonverbal communication used by each of the focus group participants.” (p. 3) They stress that it is important to not only analyse what seems to be the group consensus, but also keep an open mind for dissent and marginalized voices.

Example

An interesting example of using focus groups in research is given by Colucci (2007). In her report, she describes how she used focus groups in various phases of her research on the cultural meaning of youth suicide in university students in Italy, India, and Australia. She found that using exercises or activity-oriented questions “can [also] be helpful with young people and to discuss sensitive topics.” Further details on this research, beyond the use of exercises, can be found in Colucci and Minas (2013).

References

I found that especially the report by Onwuegbuzie et al gives a very good, yet concise overview on various aspects of the method. If you are looking for further information on focus groups, I can this article recommend to you.

Content Note for the 2013 article by Colucci and Minas: discussion of youth suicide, including various kinds of prejudice, victim-blaming/stigma and mention of ways of committing suicide. The discussion of suicide is less detailed in the 2007 article by Colucci.

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