FOCUS GROUPS AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

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David L. Morgan (1998) known for his focus group expertise defines focus groups as just group interviews. With a storied history of a hundred years oscillating between use in the social sciences and marketing research for decades until adoption again by the social sciences, their use enables researchers to truly learn how specific topics are understood by a specific community or group. This deep dive outlines how focus groups work and how to use them to their fullest potential. First, I discuss the history of focus groups and their use in social sciences with an emphasis in anthropology and health research. Then, I describe the process of organizing and holding a focus group which includes funding considerations and the data collection process. In the final section I outline analysis methods. Those cited here have all made numerous contributions in their respective fields and subjects of expertise. Many have written multiple articles and/or books on the subject of focus groups and qualitative research. Throughout, I will make note of key scholars, writers, and thinkers in focus groups.

**History of Focus Groups**

Most writers citing some period between the 1920s to the 1950s as the first decade of use. Kratz for example traces the history of focus groups and how they produce and filter knowledge, interaction, and engagement in the article “In and Out of Focus” for the American Ethnologist (2010). She situates focus groups as flourishing in marketing research to learn about consumers in the late 1950s before picking up steam in development projects and social sciences in the 1980s and beyond. However, Pranee Liamputtong (2011), an expert in focus groups, traces their history back even further to 1926 when Emory Bogardus used group interviews in his social psychosocial research to develop a social distance scale. She also states that focus groups are collective conversations arranged to examine a specific set of topics in a methodological manner. Extended to anthropology specifically, focus groups seek to capitalize on the ways “that cultural categories, values, and social relations” become apparent through interaction during conversation (Kratz 2010, 806). The late anthropologist Michael Agar, known for his work in ethnography and analysis of research methods and James MacDonald too comment on the importance of “interaction found in a group” in producing “data and insights” inaccessible in one-on-one research (1995, 78).

In short, focus groups originated out of social psychology in the 1920s, were picked up and made famous by marketing researchers in the 1950s due to structured methods of eliciting data from consumers, and then reintroduced and utilized in social sciences starting in the 1980s. Importantly, focus groups in social science unlike marketing are grounded epistemologically in the production of knowledge through discursive engagement (Kratz 2010). Hennink (2007) in her handbook on focus groups further argues that their success in social science research is because they encourage a range of responses providing a greater understanding of the “attitudes, behavior, opinions, or perceptions of participants” on the topic at hand (6). This encouragement of responses makes focus groups especially suitable for social scientists, especially anthropologists in uncovering background information in constructing questionnaires, surveys, and interview protocols. Even more so because they are effective at eliciting information about cultural mores relating to health and understanding of health issues.

For example, Rosaline Barbour (2018), who has written three books on this topic and qualitative research outlines in the SAGE toolkit *Doing Focus Groups* how health services research has most enthusiastically championed the use of focus groups. Focus groups provide insights into the experiences of people with specific diseases or exploring “women’s views of and responses to health-related behavior” as moral phenomena for example (9). Similarly, anthropologist Patricia Zavella (2014) states in her chapter on focus groups in the *Migration and Health Methods Handbook* that they enable understanding how participants “conceptualize and reflect on specific topics” which provides a deeper “context of health problems” (293). In my own research with refugee health, focus groups are one way to collect data that addresses the values, norms, and perceptions related to culturally sensitive health problems such as unpacking the stigma around mental health (Dodds 2016). They are especially helpful for working with migrant populations who believe in different ideas about healing and illness (Garces et al. 2006).

Focus groups also provide migrants who have low literacy levels and therefore might feel that “they are outsiders” when participating in questionnaires or even individual interviews a space to safely share their opinions (Zavella 2014, 295). Unlike general recommendations about focus groups, Zavella states that focus groups with migrants should be formed within a community setting because knowing some of the other participants may put the group at ease. A caveat to the pros of using focus groups is that their “opportunistic use” just results in “improvised research design and impoverished data” and should not be an opportunistic approach (Barbour 2018, 27). Similarly, just soliciting participants from a community setting does not immediately indicate a successful focus group! The next section details the process of organizing and hosting a focus group which includes data collection.

**Running a Successful Focus Group**

Once the general questions for the topic of interest are chosen, researchers must consider multiple factors from funding to how participants will sit. In fact, where people sit is a point of analysis and will be discussed in more detail in the next section. As for funding, the venue and participants dictate costs. Will the venue require payment? Is there food offered to the group participants? What about gift cards or similar incentives for participants? Those are decisions that must be made by the researchers based on the makeup of the participant group. Incentives are controversial in social science research though in marketing focus group participants are paid (Liamputtong 2011). The debate is about whether payment is coercion with marginalized groups or in areas where even $5 USD is equivalent to a week’s salary (Liamputtong 2011). However, compensation is important for focus groups because participants are required to travel to a venue which incurs expenses for the participants. Zavella (2014) suggests a modest incentive and agrees that refreshments are a good idea. The incentives should be geared towards the community so if a gift card towards gas makes more sense than towards a coffee shop, the gas card is the way to go.

Focus groups require purposive sampling and recruitment can include direct solicitation, fliers, outreach via a community center or organization, and through snowballing from one or two people who agree to join the focus group (Liamputtong 2011). The venue too must be comfortable for participants to sit in a circle and conducive to audio recording. Comfort here also means considering who will be allowed in the venue at the time of the group or if there is a separate entry that participants can use to keep the confidentiality of the group (Bloor et al. 2014). If working with a multilingual community, recruitment materials should be printed in the major languages spoken by the community and researchers should be prepared to have translators, especially when working with migrant groups (Zavella 2014). Researchers should also prepare for recruitment to take longer than expected with people needing to reschedule or not showing up even after verbally providing assent and agreement to attend a focus group. Thus, even before the focus group is hosted researchers must consider the methods of recruitment, incentives, venue choice, and actual ability to record in the room or area chosen within the venue. However, once a group actually convenes after successful recruitment, there are a number of tasks involved with starting the focus group.

An introductory period where the facilitator(s) clarify the “purpose of the research and the ground rules” which must include the importance of “confidentiality and courtesy,” that is that everyone gets to talk, is really important in making the participants comfortable (Zavella 2014, 296). Additionally, Bloor et al. (2002), suggest starting the group by using focusing exercises which help the participants to feel more at ease and get comfortable discussing the topic(s) at hand. These exercises can include ranking items, responding to vignettes (hypothetical scenarios), responding to a news piece or looking photos (Bloor et al. 2002). The focusing exercises should relate in some way to the topics of interest. By setting ground rules and using focusing exercises (including introductions) the group is now primed to discuss the researcher’s question. Then begins the true data collection. Focus groups are only as helpful as the collected data. Focus groups then require more people than in individual interviews, because the moderator cannot moderate, keep an eye on the technology, and take notes simultaneously.

Therefore, at each focus group there should be a moderator, an assistant moderator who keeps an eye on the technology and takes notes, and the principal investigator (who can take on the role of assistant moderator) (Liamputtong 2011). The moderator has the most difficult task because they are in charge of keeping the group moving and discussing the question. Krueger (2002) a world-renowned authority on focus groups points out that a good moderator must be adept at using pauses and probes, controlling their reactions to participants, using subtle group control, and of course at the end must conclude the group appropriately. Greenbaum (2012) adds that a successful moderator must be able to take in large amounts of information quickly to then ask more questions of the group participants while not talking too much in the group. The end of the group is the last moment to solicit information from the participants so Krueger (2002) suggests that the moderator briefly summarize the discussion to the participants, review the purpose of the group, and ask if anything has been missed before thanking the group and dismissing them.

Obviously, the focus group must be recorded in some fashion. This usually means a recorder with or without a microphone. Some researchers have included videoing the focus group (sometimes less acceptable to participants) (Krueger 2002). Unfortunately, none of the authors referenced here suggest outright a specific recorder or brand of technology to use in recording focus groups. Admittedly there is now more technology available for recording focus groups than there was at the time most of these articles, books, and guides were written. Ultimately, the best recorder to rent or purchase, like anything in qualitative research is dependent on the parameters which include the size of the room, acoustics, and number of participants and how closely they are sitting. If hosting a digital focus group on a video conferencing program like Zoom or WebEx, the group itself and the chat (if used) can be recorded and saved respectively which helps with data analysis. If in person, Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest that the recording device should sit alone on the table and all other devices be out of sight unless absolutely necessary. As such researchers should take handwritten notes during the focus group and during the analysis process type them up as they would field notes. These notes should include a seating map of where each participant was seated and how they were seated which will be used in the data analysis as outlined in the next section.

**Analyzing Focus Group Data**

Though there is much written on the history of focus groups and how to conduct them there is relatively little detailed directions on how to analyze the resulting data beyond brief sections in focus group guidebooks (Wilkinson 2004). Generally, most researchers use the only text of what participants stated during the focus group as their data for analysis, however there are other pieces of data that can be collected from a focus group. Krueger (1994) argues that the transcripts of participants as well as notes taken by the researcher and moderators should be analyzed. Here the focus is on transcript-based analysis which reveals the richest information on the topic of interest from use of constant comparison analysis, classical content analysis, keywords-in-context, and discourse analyses (Onwugbuzie et al. 2009). For the scope of this methods dive, the details of these four analysis methods are briefly discussed below, as the emphasis in this section is on Onwugbuzie et al.’s method of micro-interlocuter analysis.

Constant comparison analysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) is a three-stage process which divides the transcribed data into small units with a code attached to each unit, followed by grouping the codes into categories, and in the final stage. one or more themes is created to express the content of each group. This method applied to focus groups effectively serves as a proxy for theoretical sampling which assesses the meaningfulness of themes and refines themes (Charmaz 2000). Classical content analysis follows the same steps as the former method but instead of creating a theme from the codes, those codes are placed into similar groupings and counted allowing the researcher to identify which participants and groups used a particular code and how many times (Morgan 1997). Keyword in context looks at a word and its every utterance in a transcript to reveal its meaning and usage which is necessary to fully understand the relevance of a topic or topics in a focus group (Bernard et al. 2017). Finally, discourse analysis is when the researcher examines words and phrases in several lines of the transcript to examine how elements such as the “society, community, institutions, experiences, and events emerge” in the discourse (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002). These four methods like most analysis done on focus group data concentrates on the speech and the group as the unit of analysis but could also apply to notes taken. However, there is a wealth of knowledge to be gleaned from the interactions within a focus group which is the unit of analysis outlined by Onwugbuzie and his colleagues.

Using the group as the unit of analysis does preclude the analysis of the individual focus group data and can obscure the true beliefs and ideas of the participants about the topic. Utilizing both provides a much richer understanding of what actually happened in the focus group and makes the conclusions truly representative. Group analysis might miss out on the members who were quieter or did not necessarily agree with the majority viewpoint. In fact, Crabtree et al. (1993) argue that a sense of consensus in the data might be an artifact of the group itself or its dynamics. Researchers should delineate the number or proportion of participants who expressed certain views. Onwugbuzie and colleagues (2009) suggest that since some participants might show some level of agreement by nodding their head or saying “yes” or “I agree” it is necessary to document how many participants provide substantive statements of dissenting views and in the final report could include statements like “two of the six participants believed …, with the remaining participants not providing any response to this question.” Similarly, they support reporting actual counts in any publication. For example, 6 out of 7 participants had a certain viewpoint is more informative than “the majority of” participants had a certain viewpoint. The inclusion of the frequency data helps to disaggregate focus group data and to contextualize what the numbers actually mean.

Another source of data usually neglected by researchers in their final reports is how the participants actually communicated with one another. Nonverbal data such as use of interpersonal space, use of pacing in speech and length of silences in conversation, variations in volume, pitch, quality of voice, and body movements or postures are all revealing data points (Onwugbuzie et al. 2009). The seating chart created at the start of the focus group and notes taken by the researchers is key to this data analysis. Where each person sits and how they sit is marked, as is demographic information such as gender, and other characteristics offered by the participants. Finally, Onwugbuzie and colleagues (2009) discuss the use of conversation analysis which further reveals themes from the interactions among the participants and between the participants and the moderator. There are four assumptions underlying conversation analysis. The conversation has structure, it is its own autonomous context, there is no a priori justification for believing that a detail of conversation is accidental, irrelevant, or disorderly, and the study of conversation requires naturally occurring data (Markee 2000). Essentially the researcher must analyze the full array of actions and emotions, the way participants take turns when speaking (if at all), and asymmetry in the interactions (Onwugbuzie et al. 2009). Fundamentally researchers should look at *how* people talk about something before they look at *what* people are saying. Clearly there is much to analyze from data collected in a focus group beyond a single transcript per hosted group.

**Further Applications and Conclusion**

While there are no focus group specific organizations presenting trainings or conferences, the Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference is a longstanding national conference that provides a forum for presentations and engagement of ideas in qualitative research. The EQRC has workshops and a publication with scholarly articles relating directly to empirical qualitative research. Additionally, the University of Florida’s provides summer online courses in further research methods training for anthropologists. The appendix provides list of authors and their websites for more information about focus groups. Fortunately, with authors like Onwugbuzie and colleagues diversifying the approach to focus group data analysis, there will hopefully be more emphasis on training social scientists in the art of focus groups. As previously discussed, Zavella’s contribution to the discussion of focus groups with migrants is invaluable to my own future research with refugees and their experiences with health and illness in the United States. Using focus groups in a culturally appropriate manner with the support of the refugee resettlement agencies and organizations will provide a venue where Muslim refugee women can discuss their experiences candidly and will reveal key issues in accessing care for reproductive and mental health needs. Focus groups will help to reveal values and beliefs about healthcare, which is paramount to understanding barriers to accessing care, making them a necessary and incredibly useful data collection approach.

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**Appendix**

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