

FOCUS GROUPS - MAIN DETERMINANTS AND APPLICATION POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

A focus group is a 90–120-minute semi-structured conversation between 7-12 participants selected according to some relevant characteristics. The main purpose of the focus group is to determine the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions of the participants in a way that is not achievable using other methods.

The paper presents a comprehensive overview of the basic features of the focus group as a qualitative research method and an analysis of their application with an emphasis on application in education research.

The paper, in addition to theoretical analysis by reviewing the relevant literature, provides a critical review and recommendations for further research on this issue, which contributes to clarifying the purpose and encouraging the application of the focus group method.

Keywords: focus groups, interviews, qualitative method, students

Sažetak

Fokusna skupina polustrukturirani je razgovor od 90 do 120 minuta između 7 do 12 sudionika odabranih prema nekim relevantnim karakteristikama. Glavna je svrha fokusne skupine odrediti stavove, osjećaje, uvjerenja, iskustva i reakcije sudionika na način koji nije ostvariv drugim metodama. U radu je prikazan sveobuhvatan pregled osnovnih značajki fokusne skupine kao kvalitativne metode istraživanja te analiza njihove primjene s naglaskom na primjenu u obrazovnim istraživanjima. Osim teorijske analize pregledom relevantne literature ovaj rad daje kritički pregled i preporuke za daljnja istraživanja o ovom pitanju što pridonosi razjašnjavanju svrhe i poticanju primjene metode fokusne skupine.

Ključne riječi: fokusne skupine, intervjui, kvalitativna metoda, studenti

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

According to Skoko and Benković (2009), the focus group was presented to the public by Robert Merton, whose goal was to examine the impact of propaganda films intended for American citizens during World War II. The authors called this method “focused interview”, which gave an overview of its nature, use, criteria, and procedures. Initially, it was a different qualitative method, which soon attracted the attention of scientists, who agreed that respondents would rather create ideas in a group context than individually and in isolation. Since the early 1980s, the method has been applied more intensively in market research, bringing improvement to how concepts and research results of different disciplines are combined.

There are many definitions of focus groups in the literature, and various terms such as “organized discussion”, “collective activity”, “social event” and “interaction” refer to focus groups in social research. A focus group is a 90–120-minute semi-structured conversation between 7-12 participants selected according to some relevant characteristics (e.g., age, gender, etc.) and in which pre-prepared moderators produce a meaningful discussion that usually does not require consensus or agreement, but the task of the moderator is to encourage each member to present the best and most innovative ideas related to the given problem. The discussion is conducted on a pre-prepared series of topics. The questions asked by the moderators within a certain topic are open-ended in order to allow the respondents maximum flexibility in giving answers. Focus groups are a form of group interview, but it is important to distinguish between the two. A group interview involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, with an emphasis on questions and answers between the researcher and the interviewees. The focus group, however, relies on interaction within the group based on a topic given by the researcher. One of the most consistent findings in the small group literature is that all groups, no matter how temporary, will be affected by group processes (Dawidowski, 2004).

Some authors claim that focus groups can be positioned in a group of group interviews that represent a technique for collecting data within survey methods in social research, including survey and interview - Frey, Fontana, 1993; according to Ignjatović, 2019). The examination implies that the whole method is based on the verbal statements of the respondents, although some research also takes into account non-verbal forms of communication during the conversation, which actually leads to a direct link between the focus group and observation. The difference between them should be pointed out, although they seemingly use the same approach: surveys are usually planned to allow quantitative (statistical) analyzes, while interviews are mostly a qualitative method. Focus-group interview (conversation) has advantages in certain situations compared to other approaches because it includes an additional source of information that arises from the interaction of respondents, with the indirect role of researcher-moderator. It should be borne in mind that a focus group interview is not the same as a group interview, but a variation of it that has some important differences (Bloor, 2001; according to Ignjatović, 2019).

The main purpose of the focus group is to determine the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions of the participants in a way that is not achievable using other methods, e.g., by observation, interviews, or questionnaires. These attitudes, feelings, and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or social context but will most likely be revealed precisely through interaction and social context. Compared to interviews, which reflect individual attitudes, feelings, and beliefs, focus groups gather a multitude of attitudes and processes within a group context. It is easier to control the interview process than a group discussion process in which participants can take the initiative. Compared to observation, a focus group allows for the collection of a larger amount of information in a shorter period. In the observation method, the observed behavior is expected to occur, while in the focus group, the moderator poses questions to the participants. In this sense, focus groups are not natural but organized events (Dawidowsky, 2004).

Focus groups are important for achieving the possible implications behind the manifest behaviors and attitudes of certain groups, give a better insight into the topic, help develop hypotheses that will be tested in quantitative research (Paradžik et al, 2018).

Basic focus group features

In Dawidowski (2004) we find seven main components of a focus group. The core of the concept is the focus group discussion process that affects the nature of the results obtained, and the other components affect.

1. The composition of the group and the research environment influence each other and directly the cohesion of the group. The composition of the group refers to the individual characteristics of the participants (culture, socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, gender, and personality traits) that are under the control of the researcher. Group cohesion has a direct impact on the focus group discussion process.
2. The research environment refers to space where the group is held, human and material factors. Human factors refer to the number of participants in the group and their arrangement in the room, while material factors include tangible or psychological characteristics of the room (tables, chairs, recording equipment, etc.).
3. Group cohesion is a complex feature of a group expressed as the attractiveness of the group to members and their mutual attraction and the connection and resilience to the disintegration of the group. Thus, it is a reason for members to participate in group discussions, and it refers to the loyalty and commitment of participants to the group and group goals. Cohesion is influenced by the composition of the group, i.e., the characteristics of the respondents, the skills and abilities of the moderator, and the environment in which the research takes place.

4. The role of a moderator is crucial especially when it comes to explaining the purpose of the group, helping participants to relax, and facilitating interaction among participants. During the discussion, the role of the moderator is to promote the debate and ask open-ended questions to get different views on the issue. Their task is to direct and encourage discussion on the right topic if it gets stuck, to allow expression to each participant. They must not show approval for some views, statements, or stand for someone's point of view. The degree of control and directiveness of moderators depends on the objectives of the research and their own preferred style. It is recommended that one moderator lead the discussion and the other take notes.

5. Several significant factors influencing the processes in the group have been found. The first tells how difficult it is for participants to think and listen at the same time when a problem is being discussed. While listening to others, participants may be distracted and not think. They also like to practice what they will say in front of the group, which interferes with listening. Third, while waiting their turn they can forget what they wanted to say. All of this can reduce the number of new and creative ideas a group can come up with. Interviews or questionnaires with open-ended questions do not have these difficulties and there is less possibility of losing information.

6. The result of the focus group refers to the success of achieving the research goals. It has three components: a) the performance of the task related to the quality of information; b) the reaction of the users of the results related to the satisfaction with the process and the result; c) the interrelationship of group members. The result of the focus group could be called the sum of the effects of the other six components of the conceptual framework. The type, quality, and quantity of information obtained by a focus group form what is called a result that can take different forms depending on research needs (e.g., recorder notes, transcripts, audio and visual records, questionnaires, and the like). The obtained results can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

7. The process of discussion in a focus group actually refers to the dynamics of the group.

FOCUS GROUP ORGANIZATION AND PERFORMANCE

Observing from a scientific point of view, qualitative methods, and thus the focus of the group, is characterized by an inductive approach (observation, pattern, hypothesis, theory). That is, the hypothesis can be further tested on the data through the research itself. Namely, the sample is not constructed as in quantitative methods but is selected from a certain population. Respondents are selected because of their characteristics and context as a potential source of categories, so we talk about the representativeness of a concept. The aim is to discover how a phenomenon is expressed through dynamics, its consequences, and movement through context, and not to generalize the phenomenon in the general population (Strauss, Corbin, 1990; according to Skoko and Benković, 2009).

Respondents are selected based on some attribute that is relevant to the research objectives, based on who they are and how they fit into the research topic. In quantitative methods, the principles of randomness and probability are followed, and the sample size varies. Focus groups usually involve 6-12 participants, or 8 +/- 2. It is considered to be the optimal group size, small enough to allow each participant to express their point of view, and on the other hand large enough to be able to develop a certain group dynamic. One of the key rules in selecting participants is the principle of homogeneity. This means that the participants should be as similar as possible to each other, i.e., that they should be part of the same social group. Homogeneity criteria depend on the subject of the research. For example, if the research topic is gender relations, then gender is a key criterion for the principle of homogeneity, while in the case of attitudes towards accession to the European Union it does not have to be important at all. The principle of homogeneity is important for two main reasons:

- people speak more openly and freely when they are in a group of like-minded people.
- the results of focus groups are interpreted at the group level, not individually, which means that the responses of the group as a whole are observed, which is why all members of the group must be as similar as possible.

The precise definition of homogeneity criteria is one of the key factors in the successful application of focus groups as a research technique, it increases the “anonymity” of the views expressed (Skoko and Benković, 2009).

The composition of the focus group should be very careful to ensure the best quality of discussion. There is no “best” solution for group composition, and mixed groups will always influence the data, according to criteria such as age, gender, and the status of socially professional participants. It is important that the researcher sufficiently considers the impact of the mixed group (e.g., how the group can communicate with each other) before the focus group continues. Interaction is key to a successful focus group. Sometimes this means that an already existing group communicates best for research purposes, and sometimes it is foreign groups. Already existing groups can be more easily hired, have shared experiences, and enjoy comfort and acquaintance, making it easier to discuss or challenge each other. In health settings, existing groups may overcome issues related to the detection of potentially stigmatizing statuses, which could be considered uncomfortable in foreign groups (conversely, there may be situations where detection is more comfortable in foreign groups). In other research projects, it may be decided that unknown groups will be able to speak more freely without fear of consequences, and challenges for other participants may be more challenging, leading to rich data. Group size is an important consideration in focus group research. The authors suggest that it is better and excessive to employ a focus group and thus potentially manage a slightly larger group than to insufficiently activate the group and risk canceling the meeting or having an unsatisfactory discussion. They advise that each group is likely to have two absences. The optimal size for a focus group is six to eight participants (without researchers), but they can

work successfully with only three and even 14 participants. Small groups run the risk of limited discussion, while large groups can be chaotic, difficult to manage for moderators, and frustrating for participants who feel they have insufficient opportunities to speak (Gill et al., 2008).

According to Breen (2007), it is useful to write an interview schedule, not only because you need to remember a lot, but also how we ensure that there is consistency between different focus groups in the way we treat them. The focus group interview schedule should follow the following stages: welcome; topic overview; statement of the basic rules of the focus group and ensuring confidentiality; questions (starting from general experience and transition to specific problems), and obtaining background information (gender, age, etc.)

POSSIBILITIES OF APPLYING FOCUS GROUPS IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

According to Williams and Katz (2001) in the last ten years, researchers at secondary and post-secondary levels have relied on focus groups to achieve various objectives, including:

- The development of learning tools that will appeal to students' interests and needs
- The evaluation of students' knowledge or attitudes about curriculum issues
- The formulation of new marketing strategies for educational programs
- The enhancement of survey results in education research

Morgan (1993) said that focus groups were used to explore a variety of topics such as nutrition, AIDS, sex education, and technology. It is based on a critical examination of these studies and the proposals offered within current collections on practical and theoretical issues related to focus groups that recommendations can be used in the educational environment. Such recommendations or ideas are not intended to be mutually exclusive or inclusive; rather, they are designed to encourage researchers and teachers to think creatively about situations in which they might be useful. It is also conditioned to promote some thinking about the approach to feelings, attitudes, and beliefs expressed by students, teachers, parents, and administrators examined in focus groups that can prove to be an enlightening and productive process. Identifying needs, evaluating programs, and determining the effectiveness of individual curriculum topics are some of the options that might be appropriate for focus group research. So, if researchers or teachers really want to create learning tools that appeal to both students and teachers, it is necessary to identify the types of information that young people reach for and retain in lectures or measures how teachers experience curriculum-sensitive issues, then focus groups can be a useful point (Williams and Katz, 2001).

It is also important to note that focus groups are not the only and best tool for the educational process. However, it is the timely and purposeful application of the same method that

can improve what the system of our education is most struggling with. Focus groups open up opportunities within which young people can not only express their opinions or criticize, but can also learn from their peers, share opinions with them, and ultimately form their attitudes and values. It should also be emphasized that young people prefer to learn from each other rather than from books or professors, so focus groups can very well be life lessons that are not found in students. However, as we have already mentioned, they are not the only and the best. Some authors suggest a combination of quantitative surveys that are concisely discussed within qualitative focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP APPLICATION METHODOLOGY

From a scientific point of view, qualitative methods, and thus focus groups, are characterized by an inductive approach (observation, pattern, hypothesis, theory). The hypothesis can be further tested on the data through the research itself. The sample is not constructed as in quantitative methods but is selected from a specific population. Respondents are selected because of their characteristics and context as a potential source of categories, so we talk about the representativeness of a concept. The aim is to discover how a phenomenon is expressed through dynamics, its consequences, and movement through context, and not to generalize the phenomenon in the general population (Strauss, Corbin, 1990; according to Skoko and Benković, 2009). Furthermore, the analysis of the results includes the collection of impressions, careful analysis of the set of transcripts, and coding of each group. Therefore, focus groups are recorded in audio format or audio-video format. The audio recording is transcribed, and the obtained transcripts are the basis for the analysis of the results. The results are analyzed by systematizing the participants' answers to individual questions, and then it is analyzed which questions the group agrees on, which it does not agree on and which all the answers (spectrum) lead to individual questions. After such systematization of the results, it is possible to report conclusions about the goals of the research. Understanding statements within the context in which the statements were made and created is crucial. Also, perceived nonverbal communication can be extremely informative, especially with sensitive issues. The statements are coded and used in the research of similarities and differences between the attitudes of certain respondents who differ from each other in some socio-demographic characteristics.

In order for the analysis of terms and concepts to be consistent, there are certain coding schemes for analyzing the results. To reduce potential bias in data analysis and interpretation, Krueger and Casey (2000) point out that analysis should be systematic, phased, verifiable, reliable, and continuous. The authors have recorded numerous approaches to analysis in the literature, and in practice, most scientists use a combination of approaches. A clear series of steps are recommended to help manage a large amount of complex qualitative information.

Skoko and Benković (2009) state that, unlike quantitative, qualitative analysis, especially focus group analysis, takes place simultaneously with data collection, and the analysis of initial data harmonizes the collection of further data. It is important to emphasize that the analysis is not of a linear type and that the analytical processes overlap through five phases: introduction (familiarization), identification of the thematic framework, indexing, mapping, and interpretation.

Focus groups are not designed to provide statistical projections, to help participants reach a consensus on a given issue, to resolve personnel issues, or to change people's attitudes (Glitz, 1998).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

By reviewing the literature, one can gain insight into how focus groups are only on the trail of their application and "glory". It is a rather new method, which has yet to be enabled, available, and applied.

Qualitative research, specifically focus groups, requires material resources, but on the other hand also dedication and it extremely opens the horizons for children and young people to open their own and other people's views around themselves through unusual discussions.

Čilić (2020) in her work gives recommendations for further research of the qualitative paradigm, among other things she states that the first of the proposals for further research on this issue is that qualitative researchers should be persistent in proving the importance and validity of qualitative research. In addition to the above, it is important to prove the validity of the application of focus groups in education, as one of the qualitative methods.

What could be a recommendation for researchers regarding the application of the focus group method in the process of upbringing, is to take the topics of interest to students more into account, and which will easily activate them for conversation. Such topics are most often related to changes that need to happen, problems that plague them, or to their suggestions for some improvement. Such and similar topics will always be very fun to get students to say what they think, regardless of who is the excellent or dominant member of the group within which the conversation takes place. On the contrary, ideas for improvement in society, school, and class will be better presented by a person who is of average success, because he/she usually knows the reason why he/she is not excellent, that is, he/she can more easily discover demotivating factors. Such students always want to take their rights for betterment, which is not necessarily tied to academic success.

Furthermore, it would be good for focus groups to be conducted more often by school pedagogues themselves - researchers, to whom the focus group can contribute to their specific empirical data but can also lead students to get to know themselves better, as well as to get to know and understand the school pedagogues. It is understandable that school pedagogues cannot know students only by name, but it is necessary to observe them outside the test hours, in the yard, in the hallway, in regular classes.

Also, focus groups within schools can be fun for participants who see it as a form of entertainment and an interesting form of the lesson(s) that are finally different from others. Therefore, with or without a focus group as research, such and similar discussions within the educational process mean a lot to young people, because expressing opinions is what is required of them in society.

Finally, it is important to consider that students can very skillfully manipulate discussions, speak incorrectly or falsely, so there is always a new risk of unreliability and validity of focus group research among students. It is up to the researcher to evaluate but also to make sure that the application of the focus group, in this particular case, leads to reliable and valid results.

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