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Importance of Focus Groups in Qualitative Research

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Abstract:

The use of focus group discussions in qualitative research has been increasing for the last decades, both in academics and applied research areas, mostly in social sciences, health, management and education. The focus group approach is a qualitative method to collect the data on the selected topic with a structured and focused discussion in a small group of people. Focus groups are especially useful as a complement to other methods of data collection for providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time. The aim of the present paper is to give a review on focus group methods. It provides an overview of the current focus group concepts, including the definition, planning and organization of focus groups as well as discussing the importance and the limitations of these concepts in qualitative research. In addition to 'traditional' concepts, online focus groups, new approaches that are conducting the focus groups using internet online platforms are discussed.

Keywords: Focus groups, qualitative research, data collection

1. Introduction

The methodology of data collection is a very important and crucial part of any research and many different forms of data collection exist in qualitative as well as in quantitative research. Qualitative research methods do not only collect the data but also help researchers to understand the processes behind observed results by considering the thoughts, feelings and expressions of the participants. Therefore, qualitative research methods can improve and strengthen the survey based quantitative data by expanding and modifying its design. Document reviews, observations, interviews, open-ended surveys, focus groups are some of the qualitative data collection methods. By reflecting the speed, details and efficiency in supply of the results of focus groups they are playing an important role in qualitative research's data collection.

2. Defining the Focus Group

Focus groups are an extended way of the interview method, a more specific in-depth group interview with discussion. In a structured and organized way with the help of a facilitator or moderator the selected topics are explored. A focus group is, 'a group interview on a particular topic, led by a trained moderator... the goal of the focus group is to provide useful insights on the topic' (Collins and O'Brien, 2003, p. 142). According to Beck and others, a focus group is, 'an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics' (Beck *et al.*, 1986, p. 73).

The participants of the focus group shall be selected individuals, which are experienced or knowledgeable about the specific matter and which can contribute the information on the intended topic in order to get the required data. focus groups are viewed 'as a type of a group interview where a small group of individuals are gathered together for the purpose of discussing one (or sometimes more) topic of interest' (Barrows, 2000, p. 193). Moreover, 'focus groups are guided group discussions, intended to yield information on a specific topic from a selected population' (Ward, 1991, p. 267).

The preplanning and design of the discussion as well as its environment play an important role in conducting focus group sessions. Focus groups are a 'carefully planned series of discussions, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment' (Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 5).

3. Planning the focus group sessions

3.1. Venue of the Focus Group Session

The venue for the focus group session should be accessible and convenient to all participants and it should be decided beforehand. Selecting the venue in a central place would be optimal for all the participants to reach it on time without much difficulty in finding it. There should not be any disturbance or noise in or around the venue place.

A spacious room with enough light and ventilation should be selected to conduct the sessions. Semicircular or circular seating would be ideal as it allows everyone to see, to listen to and to engage with one another during the discussions. All the participants should be informed about the date, time and venue of the focus group session in advance once it is confirmed so that everyone can plan it accordingly. Refreshments can be arranged as well, depending on the time and duration of the focus group sessions.

3.2. Number and Size of Focus Groups

There are different suggestions and references from different authors regarding the number and size of the focus groups. According to Krueger, focus group research should comprise a minimum of three and the maximum of 12 participants (Krueger, 1994). There were mixed opinions on the ideal size of the focus groups. Different researchers noted different ranges in size from four (Krueger, 1994; Seggern & Young, 2003; Boddy, 2005), four to five (Twinn, 1998), five (Morgan, 1988; Ruyter, 1996), six to 12 participants (Prince & Davies, 2001), from 6 to 8 participants (Leitao & Vergueiro, 2000).

Stewart and Shamdasani suggest that there are no general rules as to the optimal number of focus groups discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Nyamathi and Shuler state that four focus groups are sufficient, but that consideration of response saturation should be made after the third focus group discussion (Nyamathi and Shuler, 1990).

4. Moderator

The moderator facilitates the interaction within the focus group with a set of previously planned open-ended questions. It is very important for the moderator to plan opening remarks, questioning sequence, physical setting and other materials effectively to make the focus group discussion successful. The moderator should be a good listener with friendliness, good sense of humor and adaptable attitude for the entire discussion to make it effective and successful.

The level of moderator's participation or involvement varies at different stages of focus groups. It can be extreme low, low, high, extreme high depending on the intensity of discussion. The moderator's involvement depends also on the course of the discussion, whether it relates to or deviates from the topic of research. Sometimes a high involvement of a moderator can lead to the bias of data, in extremes it can lead to totally non-productive discussions. A low involvement of the moderator can improve the individual ability and interest of the participants but it can also lead the groups to deviate from the topic. Hence, it is important that the moderator acts in a balanced way according the situation. It is always good for new moderators to search some guidance from experienced moderators. It is advisable that the first, or the first two, sessions are conducted by a senior moderator and attended by others. In addition, this senior moderator can attend the new moderators' first session (Krueger, 1994).

5. Participants

Selecting participants for focus groups is a very important and crucial task in order to make it a representative sample. Therefore, the demographic factors should be considered. The Formation of groups can be done by discriminating different factors like gender, age, experience and different categories related to intended selective topic. For example, two sessions with female participants, two sessions with male participants and two mixed sessions. All the focus groups should follow the same set of conditions in terms of organization so that it will be reliable to compare the groups.

However, it is important to find participants, that have knowledge about and interest in the selected topic and who are able to contribute substantially to the discussions. Each participant should have something to say on the topic. It is also advisable, that the participant generally feels comfortable in speaking with the others (Morgan, 1988). So, selecting the focus group participants, needs to be paid high attention in order to avoid the possibility of biases.

6. Organizing the Focus Groups

To organize the focus groups more effectively the approximate length of the focus groups should be planned in advance. The ideal length of the focus group sessions fluctuates according to the advice of different researchers between half an hour and three hours per focus group. They suggest half an hour and two-and-half hours per focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), two hours (Nielson, 1997), two to three hours (Schmidt, 2001), one-and-a-half to two hours (Leitao & Vergueiro, 2000; Greenbaum, 2003), from one to two hours (Gibbs, 1997) as ideal.

After the welcoming and introducing, the group moderator should announce the topic and its vision. The rules and regulations of the discussion should be margined and made clear to all the participants at the beginning of the session. All sessions should follow the same pattern.

7. Data Collection and Data Analysis of Focus Groups

Data collection and data analysis of focus groups happen to be very challenging tasks. The quality of the data depends on a number of factors, including whether the researcher locates enough participants, selects appropriate samples, chooses relevant questions, has a qualified moderator(s), and uses an effective analysis strategy (Krueger, 1993; Morgan 1995; Morgan 1996).

The mostly used methods for data collection are note taking or recording. While the best way to collect the focus group data is to record the complete session. It can be audio or video recording. Recordings will be most useful in the later data analysis. To make sure and to avoid the last-minute stress, the functioning of the camera or the recorder should be checked beforehand. Due to personality rights and the participants feeling well in the situation. All participants should be asked for a recording permission beforehand. If not, all participants have given their approval to the recording or in case of any other technical or procedural difficulty, the note taking method should be followed as the second-best solution. In such case, one research related person should be allotted to note down the complete notes of the entire session.

For the analysis of focus group data, the qualitative summary/thematic analysis and content analysis can be used. Systematic content analysis can be done by using the lexical analysis method.

8. Importance of Focus Groups in Qualitative Research

Focus groups are completely different from the other methods, in which the data can be collected individually, because they promote interaction among participants with spontaneity. The type and range of data generated through the social interaction of the group are often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interviews (Thomas *et al.*, 1995). They do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write, and they can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say (Kitzinger, 1995). The focus group method also examines in detail how the group members think and feel about the topic. A good preparation before the session helps to collect the appropriate and elaborated data related to the intended topic. Focus groups show a high possibility to explore topics widely in order to generate more information related to selective objectives and hypotheses. The costs are relatively low compared to other research tools (Dreachslin, 1999; Leitao & Vergueiro, 2000; Wall, 2001). It is also possible to construct the focus groups in quantitative and mixed versions (Johnson & Turner, 2003). However, focus groups are considerably best used as a qualitative method of data collection. Having flexibility, richness and different advantages in collecting data, focus groups became an important method to collect the qualitative data.

9. Online Focus Groups

Conducting the focus group discussions by using internet technology can be called as Online Focus Groups. Recently the use of the internet or online platforms came to the limelight to replace real in-person meeting situations. By using internet tools that are familiar in usage to the participants, like Google Meet, Skype and Zoom, focus groups can be conducted. The moderator and the participants should be able to see and hear each other with the help of webcams and microphones.

Even as online internet focus groups may be, due to technical restrictions, not as lively discussions as in presence, they do provide different advantages though. Anyone, who is eligible, from all over the world is able to participate without considering the geographical boundaries. Therefore, it gives a very wide chance to select the efficient participants for that particular topic of the discussion. It is also very convenient for the participants to participate from their home as a place they feel comfortable in. In addition, it reduces the carbon footprint, the concept of the sustainability, by avoiding the transportation of the participants. And finally, the complete session of focus group discussions can be recorded and documented very easily.

10. Limitations of Focus Groups

Every method has its own limitations, for Focus Groups it is the possibility of bias and manipulation through leading or dominating participants, difficulties in distinguishing between an individual view and a group view, the difficulty of generalizing the results from the small focus group to the larger population, as it is difficult to have a really representative sample. Also, the analysis and interpretation of the results are quite a difficult task for the researcher and therefore additional limitations of focus groups (Litoselliti, 2003).

11. Conclusion

Focus groups help to discover new aspects and information of one's research, as the participants own and contribute together much more and more diverse perspectives on the selected topic than the researcher could imagine alone. Focus Groups have a high chance to catch and consider the peoples' feeling, expressions, views, beliefs and responses while collecting the data. Therefore, focus groups are a very valuable tool for qualitative research. They can be used in a pre-structuring phase of the research to check if all possible dimensions of a topic are in the awareness of the researcher or when a researcher wants to collect different points of view or judgments of experts.

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