

Focus groups: issues of analysis and interpretation

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Focus groups have become a popular method in nursing research. Their history can be traced back to marketing research methods, but they have also been used in qualitative, ethnographic research. Our study, which used this approach as part of data collection, raised many issues of analysis and interpretation: in particular, the importance of paying attention to the sequence of focus group discussions, the individuals involved, and the social context of the focus group. We conclude that focus groups are not a 'quick and easy' method of collecting data, and that issues of validity and the relationship between focus group data and other data require careful consideration.

Keywords: data collection, focus groups

INTRODUCTION

Focus groups are becoming more common in nursing research, appearing to offer a quick and cost-effective way of gathering data. They have been defined by Kitzinger (Kitzinger 1994 p. 103) as follows:

Focus groups are group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues... The group is 'focused' in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity.

Gathering research participants together for group interviews allows researchers to gather data from a number of participants in one session, thus avoiding the time-consuming processes of individual interviews. Much of the literature on focus groups highlights this advantage, particularly the literature from marketing and business studies, where the technique has been used for several

decades, and there is a plethora of papers describing the 'mechanics' of setting up such groups in order to make them effective. This advice is useful, but it tends to neglect equally important issues such as the way in which focus group data can be analysed and the nature of the data collected. The fundamental differences between a focus group and an individual interview are often only briefly discussed in pragmatic, rather than theoretical terms, suggesting that the status of the data and approaches to analysis are unproblematic.

In addition, much of the literature on focus groups, especially from the market research field, assumes or advocates that group members do not know each other (see, for example Mendes de Almeida 1980). This is in marked contrast to many nursing research studies which involve staff groups where members not only know each other, but have done so for a considerable period of time; they may have studied or worked together (see, for example Nyamathi & Shuler 1990, Lankshear 1993). This changes the group dynamics considerably, and should be addressed when using or reporting this technique.

In this paper we argue, by reference to a specific study

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that used focus groups, that this methodology needs careful consideration when making decisions about what sort of data are appropriate to a study, what analysis is needed, and how issues of validity can be addressed.

LITERATURE

The origin of focus groups is a somewhat complex process to identify — it is often attributed to market research methodology, where they continue to be used, but their development can also be traced in social sciences methodology (Agar & MacDonald 1995). Mendes de Almeida (1980) further notes that the term is often used in an imprecise way and that similar terms, such as group interview, are often used as if they were synonymous. Mendes de Almeida therefore suggests that there is a 'family' of techniques, which have in common a use of group-based data. These different interpretations and terms render the focus group somewhat confusing, and reading across the range of literature is a puzzling experience.

In addition, some literature concerns itself with issues of representativeness and generalization, while other discussions take a more ethnographic course. Therefore, in discussing the debates surrounding the use of focus groups, we have found it useful to divide the literature into two areas: market research and the wider field of qualitative social research. While the two fields are not completely distinct, we feel that the emphasis in each is sufficiently different to make this 'classification' useful in understanding the debates.

Focus groups in market research

In market research focus groups have been used to obtain feedback from consumers on advertising campaigns or product launches. Literature on conducting groups pays a great deal of attention to the skills of the moderators; their ability to 'control' the group (Bradley 1982), but also to be empathetic (Langer 1978). There is also some advice on selecting participants using recruitment agencies or mailing lists. Tynan and Drayton (1988) suggest that the group should be 'fairly homogenous, with a little diversity to ensure different points of view and to stimulate discussion. The focus group in market research is usually composed of members who have no previous relationship with each other. Indeed Mendes de Almeida (1980) has argued that previous relationships would make the participants 'vulnerable' to group culture, and rather than a spontaneous discussion ensuing, the group would reflect prevalidated ideas.

The perceived advantages of focus groups in marketing research seem to be largely about cheapness, speed and flexibility. Drayton *et al.* (1989) for example, argue that they are economical, quick to organize, and allow moderators to respond to group discussions in order to pursue

particularly interesting points. There is also the suggestion that statements made in a group may be less constrained than those made in individual interviews — Goldman (1962) argued that focus groups provoke 'considerably greater spontaneity and candour than can be expected in an individual interview. While Drayton *et al.* do note that focus groups afford opportunities to observe group pressures on an individual, and that respondents will stimulate each other, this interaction is portrayed very much as a means to an end. In other words, such interaction is of interest insofar as it affects the statements that the group makes, rather than being a focus of analysis in itself.

Criticisms The criticisms of focus groups most often noted in the marketing literature are those which point out the 'unrepresentative' nature of the data from such small samples. Many of these criticisms are applied to qualitative research in general, and are therefore extended to focus groups, with Tuck (1976) making the disparaging comment that focus groups are no more than comfort mechanisms for decision makers.

The lack of 'representativeness' has led to doubts about validity, in that there are suggestions that the data from focus groups may be idiosyncratic, and there is no clear way of ascertaining this. The debate about validity in market research, however, uses terms more usually associated with positivist methodologies, and so there are some questions about whether this debate is partly a function of the place of a qualitative technique in a discipline which has strong positivist traditions.

Focus groups in qualitative social research

In the literature on qualitative social sciences the debate is more broad, and there is an emphasis on interactive processes which is derived from anthropological and ethnographic traditions. Morgan (1988), for example, argues that focus groups are characterized by 'the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group'. This explicit use of interaction, however, is not always evident in the approaches to analysis and the reporting of findings in many research reports. Kitzinger, for example, argues that 'group work has not been systematically developed as a research technique within social science in general', going on to comment that 'Reading some such reports [of focus group studies] it is hard to believe that there was ever more than one person in the room at the same time' (Kitzinger 1994 p. 104). While methodology texts may well stress the importance of group interaction, Kitzinger's comment suggests that this concern is not always evident in the way that research papers and reports are written.

This omission perhaps demonstrates some of the difficulties in developing analytical methods and

reporting strategies which address group interaction in the qualitative research tradition which has concentrated, in its methodology, on the 'in-depth' interview, where researchers explore issues at great length, but usually with only one participant at a time. In this tradition, attention is paid to multiple methods, perhaps integrated under the umbrella term of 'participant observation' and gaining an understanding of the social contexts in which views and feelings are developed. Ignoring group interaction in the analysis of focus group data, therefore, misses an important part of this context, the interaction between group members.

A further point is made by Agar & MacDonald (1995) in their discussion of the way in which focus groups have been used in qualitative research, and that is that focus groups are sometimes used as 'stand-alone' methods. They argue that 'Our intuition is that a few hours with a few groups guarantees only that the "quality" in "qualitative" will go the way of fast food.' (Agar & MacDonald 1995 p. 78). In their study, they argue, interpretation of focus group data was only possible because of prior ethnographic work that they had done.

Both of these points, the analysis of focus group data and its integration with other ethnographic methods, arose in a recent study that we conducted. In facing these issues, we developed some ideas about the use of focus groups which we hope will be of use to others.

THE STUDY

The study (Reed & Payton 1996) was primarily concerned with understanding the experiences of older people moving into six nursing and residential homes. The research design involved conducting four interviews with older people, beginning, where possible, prior to their move, and ending approximately six months afterwards. Forty-one elderly people were recruited to the study. In addition, six older people who had been residents for some time when the study began, gave us retrospective accounts of their move. The second strand to the study involved the exploration of the views of staff in the care homes through focus groups, in order to learn how they saw the moving and settling in processes.

Focus groups

The staff focus groups were conducted when a substantial amount of interview data from older people had been collected and been subject to preliminary analysis. In each home in the study we aimed to conduct two focus groups, the first to invite staff comments on our analysis of interviews with older people, and the second, as the study was nearing its close, to discuss implications for practice. However, in two homes in the study, only one focus group was conducted, due to the problem of staff availability.

Our data from the interviews with older people therefore gave us ideas about what it was salient to discuss, but perhaps, more importantly, privileged the voices of residents. By listening to them first, and then moving on to staff, we were able to maintain the views of the residents as a primary reference point for discussions. If the sequence of interviews had been different, for example if we had talked to staff first, this may not have been possible.

The focus groups were conducted with staff in the care home setting, partly because the difficulties of arranging transport to a special interview setting were immense, but also because we felt that a strange setting would be uncomfortable for staff. As we discuss later, this strategy had other consequences, but as we were interested in the perspectives that shaped practice, it seemed appropriate to conduct the focus groups in the practice setting. In each focus group both researchers were present, one to lead the discussion, and one to follow up and clarify points of interest.

ISSUES OF ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

When the focus group interviews were transcribed, we were immediately faced with a fundamental problem of coding the data. We had used NUD.IST, a qualitative data analysis package which allows codes to be attached to data, and retrieved and sorted in a variety of ways (Richards & Richards 1991). Interview transcripts are entered into the program and divided into text units. In our study the text unit was defined as a line of text, but it is also possible to use paragraphs as text units. Each text unit can then have one or more codes attached to it, from a list which can be added to and developed as analysis proceeds. One way of defining codes is to focus on the content of what people have said, the topics which they discuss, which can then be developed into theoretical concepts or categories. Codes can also be developed to indicate the identity of the speaker, and the time and place of the interview.

This approach was used, but it soon became evident that it needed to be augmented by other information if it was to make any sense. Simply retrieving all of the things that staff had said about a particular topic produced a confusing picture, or one which was of little analytical use. These retrievals tended to do little more than produce a list of things that people had said, and this, naturally, tended to be contradictory. For example, one of the questions that we asked was about the degree to which residents developed friendships with each other, and we had coded staff responses under the heading 'residents relationships with each other'. Retrieval of this data simply told us that some staff felt that they did form relationships, and some staff felt that they didn't.

Sequences of discussion

When we went back to the interview transcripts, however, a much richer picture could be seen. When the topic had first been introduced, initial responses were very much spontaneous, but as the group began to discuss the issue their ideas changed, as they reflected on their experiences. The transcripts showed a process of evolving consensus and debate, where assertions were qualified and challenged. What had seemed from the data retrieval as a simple diversity of opinion indicated that staff changed their ideas when they were prompted to think about their work, so initial group and individual responses changed over the period of the focus group.

Another example of a change over time and through discussion is when we talked to staff about getting involved with residents. The transcript shows that the staff discussed a number of aspects of this issue.

Researcher: Is there a problem, or do you think there's a problem with getting too involved with residents?

S1: It's very hard not to.

S2: But you can't

S3: It's very hard not to get involved, very hard.

S2: It is very hard.

S4: But you've got to show that not one's different to another.

S1: That's right.

S4: I mean we've all got our favourites,

S2: Oh yes.

S4: But I wouldn't like to think people knew who mine were.

S3: Yes, I think sometimes you can, I know some people that tend to do a little bit more for someone that they're not particularly keen on.

S4: I think we do it that way.

In this transcript the process of debate can be seen quite clearly. There is acknowledgement of the difficulty of keeping a distance from residents, and an appeal to egalitarianism as a justification for staff trying to maintain this. Finally the discussion moves on to a consideration of how unpopular residents are cared for under the same egalitarian principles. We can also see the way in which the debate is progressed, with some staff affirming each other's statements, others qualifying them, and others introducing new ideas or directions.

Key worker system Another example of this process is where we discuss the problems inherent in the allocation of staff to particular residents, under a 'key worker' system.

Researcher: I was thinking that's another thing, because you could have a key worker who didn't get on with the resident or a resident who just didn't take to the key worker. If that happens do people feel a bit, a bit hurt, you know if ...?

S1: I'm sure.

S2: I wouldn't, I don't think I would, I would feel it was best for them.

S3: Oh you would but you'd still feel hurt... do you not think you would, would you not?

S2: If I thought they were all right.

S4: But I think deep down I think that everybody ...

S5: I think you'd be wondering why.

S3: Yes, you'd be thinking ...

S5: I wonder why he... you'd look into it.

S1: You'd think, but what have I done you know.

S2: Oh well it happened with me didn't it?

S4: Mmh.

S2: I mean there was one resident was terrified of me. She was being sick at the thought of me coming on duty.

S5: Really?

If this exchange was represented as a list of statements agreeing or disagreeing with the question, we would not be much further forward. By examining the discussion in sequence, however, we can see how views are modified and developed, and in the case of S2, who discloses a particular event, how they are related back to experiences. Where coding only includes topics or content, these processes can be missed. Including the sequence of the discussion, and the identity of the people speaking adds another dimension to the data which allows the social context of the focus group to be explored. Coding for time and person, therefore, seems to us to be vital in the analysis of focus group data.

While we had anticipated the need to identify different participants in the focus groups, we had not realized the importance of the sequence of discussion. Fortunately it is possible in NUD.IST to get printouts of data which include the number of the text unit, and sequence can be determined by using these numbers. For example, a text unit numbered 36 precedes one numbered 47. In addition, retrieval of coded text units can specify the inclusion of preceding and following text units, so that some sense of sequence can be made. In programmes or methods without these facilities there is a danger that sequence can be lost.

Responses to different types of questions

Another advantage of paying attention to sequence was apparent when we looked at data across focus groups, particularly between the first groups, which began with general questions, and the second groups, which invited responses to specific practice recommendations. We were able to examine the data from these two types of group with reference, not just to the ideas expressed, but to the processes of discussion, and we found that while the first groups produced more hesitant and discursive responses, the second group's questions were met with more definite responses. For example, the following excerpt shows the response of a focus group to the idea that new residents should be allocated an established resident as a 'buddy' in the first few days or weeks, to help them settle into the home.

S1: No, that wouldn't work — some wouldn't want the responsibility, and others would overdo it.

S2: It would be better to do it with a group, you know, say ask a few people to look after the new resident. Then there wouldn't be so much pressure.

S1: And you'd avoid people getting too possessive and dominating the new person.

This sequence of exchanges suggests that staff were more comfortable with action-orientated questions, and their responses were more definite and confident. This does not mean that the questions in the first groups were wrong, as it was interesting to note the differences between the responses to questions which stimulated reflection, and those which stimulated plans for practice. The differences could be regarded as a finding in themselves, although from this limited study we would be reluctant to draw any conclusions about modes of working, or staff's views of their job. What is perhaps more important is that without coding for time, these differences would not have been observed at all, and the link between types of question and types of response could not have been made.

Dominant members

One of the warnings often given in guidelines for focus groups is that researchers should be careful not to allow one group member to dominate the discussion. Where the focus group is convened by the researchers, from people previously unknown to each other and in an unfamiliar setting, this may be possible (although we have our doubts). In our study, however, group members were well-known to each other, and the interviews were conducted on their territory. Previously established formal and informal power relationships were therefore impossible to control; although we did make efforts to involve all participants in the discussions, inevitably some members domi-

nated the conversation. This was particularly the case in one focus group which included a manager. Analysis of the transcript showed that out of nearly 700 text units (lines of transcript) produced by the staff, less than 40 were from other members of staff, the rest were from the manager.

This analysis suggests that this focus group was little more than an interview with one person, and as such it breaks all the rules of focus group interviewing. It was not without some value, however, in that it expanded on some of the other data that we had collected in that home, where resident's discussions of staff had focused on the managers, while other staff remained vague presences in their accounts. The combination of these two data sources led us to develop ideas about management styles, and the relationship between the empowerment of staff and of residents.

This focus group provides support for Agar & MacDonald's (1995) assertion that focus groups in qualitative research are severely limited if they are used as 'stand alone' tools, without any other ethnographic data. If we had used focus groups alone in this study we would have either dismissed this one as a failure, or taken it at face value and not thought about the social context of the interview. By paying attention to the persons who were interviewed, however, we were able to tentatively identify patterns of interaction between types of staff. If we had wished, or had been able, to pursue issues of power among staff, then this focus group would certainly have provided some initial ideas which could have been explored further in subsequent groups, where we might have wanted to choose groups according to level of qualification or seniority.

Relationship to other data

Agar & Macdonald have argued that the use of stand alone focus groups is a 'fast food' form of qualitative research, and as such leads to a superficial understanding of the data they produce (Agar & MacDonald 1995 p. 78). In our study we were involved in a broader ethnographic project, and it is difficult to estimate how we would have interpreted the data if this had not been the case. Certainly there were some terms and forms of language that would have been puzzling to us if we had come 'cold' to the focus groups, and some events and practices which would have required laborious explanation if we had not known about them previously.

These were certainly advantages in our study, but to extend the argument further seems to us to be a potentially dangerous path for a qualitative researcher, in that it suggests a form of 'triangulation' which is essentially positivist in nature, in that it leads to the use of different sources of data to 'check up' on findings. In this formulation of triangulation, the focus group data could have been used

to confirm or disconfirm the responses of the residents (or vice versa). This suggests that one form of data is more 'true' or 'better' than another, whereas another view is that they are different forms of data developed in different contexts.

Where we would agree with Agar & MacDonald, however, is in their statement that previous ethnographic work 'enables a richer and more significant interpretation of focus group data' (Agar & MacDonald 1995 p. 85). In our case data from interviews with residents had provided a number of different accounts of the process of moving into a care home, and the focus groups provided yet other accounts, this time from a different group of people. Extending the range of accounts through an exploration of the staff group beliefs, it was then possible to analyse the differences and similarities between them, and to develop some ideas about the relationships between residents and staff's experiences.

ISSUES OF VALIDITY

Nyamathi & Shuler (1990), in discussing validity in focus groups, comment that 'Typically focus groups have high face validity, due to the credibility of comments from participants' (Nyamathi & Shuler 1990 p. 1284). While this credibility may well be important in determining the acceptance of findings, it seems to us that if this is the only form of validity that can be claimed for focus groups, then they may do little more than confirm and support assumptions and prejudices.

We would suggest that 'validity', which is often described as 'the degree to which a procedure really measures what it is supposed to measure' (Nyamathi & Shuler 1990 p. 1284) needs to be thought through very carefully. If we replace the word 'measure' with a term more appropriate to qualitative research, such as 'reflect', then the definition is still relevant — we are then directed to think about what it is that the procedure is meant to reflect.

Suggestions that the focus group reflects some broadly defined 'reality' of perceptions or practices, that it presents 'facts about the real world external to the focus group', seem to us to be mistaken. In other words, we would argue that what a focus group reflects is the process of developing a group perspective or position among a particular set of people. This does not mean that what people say in a focus group is unique or confined to that event, however, since people come to a focus group with particular ideas and processes that they have developed previously, and this is particularly the case where group members have worked with each other over time.

Status of interview data

Some light on this problem can be shed by reference to debate on the status of interview data which Silverman

(1985) outlines. He argues that while one view of the interview is that it is a straightforward report on an external reality (the positivist view), and another is that the interview simply reflects the conventions and structures of doing an interview (the ethnomethodologist position), another stance is possible. This, he argues, is that interviews can be analysed and heard as 'displays of cultural and moral forms'.

If we think of focus groups as displays of cultural and moral forms of the group, then we can address validity in terms of the extent and way in which this is done. Including aspects of time, person and context in the analysis of the data allows us to make some statements about whether group displays were well developed or restricted, for example, whether (as in the case of the focus group with the manager) they were presented as incontrovertible statements or as ideas for exploration, and whether there was some degree of consensus which members were able to link to their practice, or whether there was a degree of dissent and divorce from experience.

By viewing the focus groups as 'displays of perspective' (Silverman 1985), and moreover as displays of *group* perspective, attention is drawn to how these perspectives are negotiated and developed between members. While some focus groups, as in the first example given above, indicate a more discursive mode of display and development, the focus group dominated by the manager indicated a very different process. If we are able to make statements about these dimensions, then we can say something about validity. If we cannot say anything about these aspects of display, then we are not reflecting what a focus group is supposed to reflect.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have noted some of the approaches to focus groups, which are becoming a popular tool in nursing research. We have argued that the marketing research debates do not address issues likely to be faced by nurses who wish to take a qualitative approach, or to conduct studies with groups of people who are not strangers to each other. The literature on focus groups in qualitative research has also been criticized for its neglect of group dynamics and its decontextualization from other forms of activity, and these issues were certainly important in our study.

From our experiences of analysing data, we would strongly suggest that researchers pay attention to issues of time and person if they wish to produce anything more than 'a list of things that people have said'. Our data analysis showed that if this is not done, then the results are difficult to extend into a fuller understanding of the phenomena under study. This understanding can also be extended by integration with other forms of data to provide a more rounded picture of the phenomena and views being studied.

These recommendations may discourage those who hope that focus groups can be a quick and easy shortcut to data, but we would argue that like all shortcuts, this approach provides a restricted view of the terrain being travelled.

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