Choosing And Using Qualitative Research: The Focus Groups Method

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บทความนี้พิจารณาประเด็นทางทฤษฎีและทางระเบียบวิธีที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการเลือกและการใช้เทคนิคการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยเน้นที่วิธีการที่เรียกว่า focus groups ในส่วนแรกของบทความพิจารณาจุดยืนทางญาณปรัชญาของการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและประเด็นทั่วไปที่ควรคำนึงถึงในการเลือกวิธีการเก็บข้อมูลที่มีอยู่หลากหลายวิธีการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ส่วนต่อมา บทความได้อภิปรายลงลึกในประเด็นเจาะจงที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ focus groups โดยเริ่มที่ประเด็นความสำคัญของการปฏิสัมพันธ์กลุ่มซึ่งเป็นคุณลักษณะหลักของวิธีการ focus groups นี้ ต่อมาจึงอภิปรายถึงเกณฑ์สำคัญที่ควรพิจารณาในการเลือกและการใช้วิธีการดังกล่าว ต่อมา บทความได้อภิปรายอย่างกว้างขวางเกี่ยวกับประเด็นการสุ่มตัวอย่าง ท้ายที่สุด ประเด็นเรื่องจริยธรรมในการวิจัยได้ถูกยกขึ้นมาพิจารณาด้วย ในส่วนสรุป บทความได้เสนอให้พิจารณาใช้เทคนิคและวิธีการหลากหลายในการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพเพื่อความน่าเชื่อถือของผลการวิจัย

Abstract

This article considers the theoretical and methodological issues involved in choosing and using a range of qualitative research techniques. It focuses on focus group techniques. The first part examines general issues of concern when choosing qualitative research methods. Next, the paper deals with specific issues of focus groups. It first discusses the importance of group interaction which is the prime characteristic of focus group

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methods. It progresses to discuss several criteria to keep in mind when choosing and using this method. The final part extensively discusses sampling which is an important issue in qualitative research. Ethical considerations are also covered in this part. The paper ends with a proposal about the need for triangulation of various techniques in qualitative research.

Introduction

Qualitative research is complex, multidimensional and pluralistic with respect to paradigms involved (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Qualitative research uses multiple methodologies and research practices. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 2) point out, qualitative research crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters. A complex, inter connected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surround the term *qualitative research*'. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible, and researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). In particular, qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding meanings which people attach to phenomena within their social world. It is an 'in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences perspectives and histories'(Snape and Spencer, 2003: 3). However, this article considers the theoretical and methodological issues involved in choosing and using focus group techniques.

Before discussing specific methodological issues, it is worth considering the philosophical stance on which qualitative research is based. Qualitative research takes the premise that the social world is regulated by normative expectations and shared understanding. As Punch (2001: 192) writes 'the truth about human social behavior is not independent of context'. Our actions are governed by the rules which we use to interpret the world. The rules exist in social action through which we

produce society and understand and recognise each other. Rules are subjected to different interpretations. Researchers cannot know these interpretations independently from people's interpretations of them. The only thing we can know with certainty is how people interpret the world around them. Thus qualitative research focuses on the meanings that people give to their environment. In other words, while the social world exists independently of individual subjective understanding, it is only accessible to us via interpretations (Hammersley, 1992). In sum, social life can be understood only through an examination of people's selection and interpretation of events and actions (May, 2001); therefore, the focus of researchers is upon people's understandings and interpretations of their social environments.

Based upon this theoretical ground, interpretivism becomes an integral part of qualitative research. It emphasises the importance of understanding peopleís perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives. Thus, there is the need for researchers to employ hermeneutic principles which refers to the theory and practice of interpretation (May, 2001). The researcher is not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text, but instead is historically positioned and locally situated as an observer of the human condition (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative methods take the researchers' communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge production instead of excluding it as far as possible as an intervening variable. The subjectivity of the researchers and of those being studied is a part of the research process. Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field; their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation (Flick, 2002). Researchers then are the instruments of the research, and the research relationship is the means by which the research gets done. This relationship has an effect not only on the participants in the study, but also on the researchers and on other parts of the research design.

Choosing The Method

The quality of research is determined by the results it produces. A good research design is one component of the research strategies that yield valid research findings. The fit between research questions and methods being used in designing the research will generate valid and reliable data that achieve credible findings. Thus, it is important to choose the most appropriate research methods in addressing specific research questions. In other words, the content of the research, which is represented through research questions, has a logical priority over the method of the research. As Shulman (1988: 15) suggests, 'we are advised to focus first on our problem and its characteristics before we rush to select the appropriate method'.

However, questions and methods are only two components of a research project in which all parts should fit together. The other components are interpretive paradigms, strategies of inquiry, data collection procedures, data analysis and interpretation procedures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The fit is all about the overall validity of a piece of the research. Nevertheless, this article focuses on selecting and using data collection methods.

Choosing between various data collection methods depends primarily on which type of data will best illuminate the research topic and on practical considerations (Patton, 2002). Studies, particularly those investigating multiple research questions, may encompass several data collection efforts. What is critical is that the method of data collection produces reliable, valid and meaningful data (deVaus, 2001) and, at the same time, the researcher should 'determine the most practical, efficient, feasible, and ethical methods for collecting data as the research progresses' (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 138). Bickman et al. (1998) discuss some useful issues when deciding the data collection methods. Firstly, they suggest the researcher should identify the likely sources of data available to address the research questions. The form in which the data are found is an important factor for any social research and may even determine the overall feasibility of the study. Some research is easy

to conduct because the data sources are obvious and have already been gathered, archived, and computerised. Some data may sometimes be so difficult to gather that the study is not feasible. However, when dealing with extant data from archival sources, one common drawback is that the data were originally constructed for a purpose other than meeting the specific objectives of the researcher. Secondly, researchers must anticipate the amount of data needed which involves decisions regarding the number and variety of data sources, the time periods of interest, and the number of units (e.g. study participants). Lastly, even when accurate and reliable data exist or can be collected, researchers must ask whether the data fit the necessary parameters of the design.

More specifically, data can be differentiated into two types, based on the classification of data collection methods : 'naturally occurring data' and 'generated data' (Ritchie, 2003). Naturally occurring data derive from social phenomena in their natural settings. The behaviors and interactions are understood in real world contexts. Generated data requires the re-processing and re-telling of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors or other phenomena. This gives insight into people's own perspectives on and interpretation of their beliefs and behaviors. The main methods involved in working with naturally occurring data are participant observation, observation, documentary analysis, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis; while the main types of generated data are in-depth interviewing and focus groups.

Lewis (2003) suggests that in choosing among methods we need to consider the issues of context, interpretation, and accessibility. Generated data collection methods allow participants to describe their personal or organizational contexts in which the research issue is located and how they relate to it. For instance, interviews are suitable when a study focuses on the meaning of particular phenomena to the participants (King, 1994). On the other side, if the fundamental aspect of the research phenomenon is critically understood by observing or experiencing it in natural context, naturally occurring data collection methods are likely to be preferred. For the issue of interpretation, the key distinction between naturally occurring and generated data is

the role of researcher and participant interpretation. Naturally occurring data relies on the researcher's interpretation of what is observed or read. While the meaning that the research issue holds for a participant is embedded in their enactment of it, it is the researcher who draws out that meaning and makes it explicit. Generated data collection methods, on the other hand, give participants a direct and explicit opportunity to convey their own meanings and interpretations through the explanations they provide, whether spontaneously or in answer to the researcher's probing. Generated data may be further interpreted by the researcher, but the participant's own interpretation is seen as critically important. For the issue of accessibility, if naturally occurring data already exist (e.g. documents) or if there are environments or events where they are displayed, the researchers should consider whether they gain direct access to the data or not. In case the generated data would shed more light on the research issue, the researchers should ponder whether it is actually feasible to carry out in-depth interviews or focus groups. The next part of this article turns specifically to a discussion of focus groups.

Specific Issues in Choosing and Using Focus Groups

Morgan (1988: 12) argues that 'the hallmark of focus groups is 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 method assumes that an individual's attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: people often need to listen to others' opinions and understandings in order to form their own. Finch and Lewis (2003) point out that the group context creates a process in which data are generated by interaction among group participants. In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study, the language they use, and the emphasis they give; and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display. As the discussion progresses, individual responses are sharpened and refined, and move to a deeper and more considered level. Group interaction, then, can stimulate people in making explicit their views, perceptions, motives, and reasons. This means focus groups can make

an attractive data gathering option, when the researcher is trying to probe those aspects of people's behavior. However, focus groups have some disadvantages as well. Further summary of the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups are shown in Table 1.

Type of data and area of study

Lewis (2003) advises that focus groups offer less opportunity for the detailed generation of individual accounts, but they are used where the group process, the interaction between participants, will itself illuminate and reflect the research issue. Because focus groups involve discussion, and hearing from others, they give participants more opportunity to refine what they have to say. This can be particularly useful in attitudinal research. In addition, the interaction among participants is also useful where the research requires creative thinking, or solutions and strategies. Focus groups allow individuals to form opinions about the designated topic through interaction with others (Vaughn et al., 1996). The method provides a social context within which the phenomenon is experienced; they display the way in which context can shape participantsí views, and show how data are generated through conversation with others.

More abstract, intangible or conceptual research topics are well suited to focus groups, where the discussants can work together to tackle the subject. Focus groups are also useful for studies focusing on attitudes, or for difficult and technical issues where some type of information giving may be required. Even very sensitive subjects can be explored by focus groups if people have similar proximity to or experience of the issue, but particular care will be required in group composition and in the conduct of the group (Lewis, 2003). Furthermore, topics which people are likely to see as confidential, or where social norms are key, are less conducive to group discussion, unless what is required is a display of those social norms. When a high degree of specificity is required or when more intangible or subconscious subjects are discussed, focus groups tend to be more favorable.

Moreover, Lewis (2003) suggests that focus groups are suitable where participants are likely to be willing and able to travel to attend a group discussion. Focus groups benefit from diversity in group composition; but it is usually helpful for members to have some commonality in their relationship to the research topic, or in the socio-demographic characteristics which are most relevant to it. Certainly significant difference in status between participants in the same group should be avoided. Further discussion on this issue appears in the next section. Finally, focus groups can also provide an environment which makes research accessible to people who might, for various reasons, find a one-on-one encounter intimidating or uncomfortable.

Group composition and size

Group composition and size are an important issues in using focus groups. There is a debate about whether the groups should be homogeneous or heterogeneous. The pros and cons of the two approaches are presented in Table 2. As a general rule, some diversity in the composition of the group aids discussion, but too much can inhibit it. If the group is too disparate, it is difficult to cover key topics in depth. Sensitive topics leave less scope for diversity, although some differences among group participants are nevertheless desirable. It is necessary for respondents in each group to have broadly the same proximity to the research subject. There needs to be a degree of commonality in how the participants relate to the research topic. The socio-demographic makeup of the group can influence how frank and fulsome discussion will be. It is unhelpful if there are significant imbalances in social power or status within the groups (Finch and Lewis, 2003).

In regard to the issue of size, the optimum group size will depend on a number of issues. Finch and Lewis (2003) suggest that a small group is desirable if the participants are likely to be highly engaged with or interested in the topic. Sensitive or complex issues are better tackled in smaller groups. The small group is better if the depth of data is critical, while the larger group is more effective if breadth is key.

Children or the elderly are likely to feel more comfortable in smaller groups. If the group is larger, not everyone will be able to have their say to the same extent, and the active participation will be uneven. However, if the group is very small, say fewer than four participants, it could lose some of the qualities of being a group.

Role and power relations

The issue of role and power in focus groups should be addressed here. Although the questions in a focus group setting are deceptively simple, the trick is to promote the participants' expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The role of the researcher then changes in group interviewing: functioning more as a moderator or facilitator, and less as an interviewer. The process will not be one of alternate question and answer, as in in-depth interviewing; rather, the researcher will be facilitating, moderating, monitoring and recording group interaction (Punch, 2001). The interviewer creates a supportive environment to encourage discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view. However, we should be aware as Sim (1988) notes that the skills and attributes of the moderator, and the manner of data recording, will exert a powerful influence on the quality of the data collected in focus groups. We need to be concerned about balancing individual contributions within the group. Finch and Lewis (2003) suggest that researchers must ensure that every participant gets a chance to contribute to the discussion and should try a range of strategies, indirect or direct, to shift attention away from the dominant participant so others may speak. In addition, research also needs to draw out reticent participants, since they often have viewpoints or experiences that are different from the others, and therefore, of particular interest to the researchers.

Sampling

Sampling is an important issue in qualitative research because we cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything. 'Sampling

decisions are required not only about which people to interview but about settings and processess' (Punch, 2001: 193). Maxwell (1996) notes that 'selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide information needed in order to answer research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative sampling decisions' (p. 70). This means the most appropriate sampling method in qualitative research is neither probability sampling nor convenience sampling, but falls into a third category: termed 'purposeful sampling' (Patton, 1990), 'criterion-based selection' (Lecompte and Presisle, 1993), or 'purposeful sample' (Punch, 2001). This is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be acquired as well by other means. Punch (2001: 193-194) writes:

> ...There must be an internal consistency and a coherent logic, across the studyís components, including its sampling. The sampling plan and sampling parameters (settings, actors, events, processes) should line up with the purposes and the research questions of the study.

The four possible goals of purposeful sampling, proposed by Maxwell (1996), are helpful in making judgment about sampling. The first goal is achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected. A small sample that has been systematically selected for typicality and relative homogeneity provides far more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the average members of the population than does a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation. The second goal is to adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population. The purpose here is to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range. This is best done by defining the dimensions of variation in the population that are most relevant to the study, and systematically selecting individuals, times, or settings that represent the most important possible variation on these dimensions. The third goal is to select a sample

to deliberately examine cases that are critical for the theories that we began the study with, or that we have subsequently developed. The fourth goal is to establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals. However, one particular sampling problem in qualitative studies has been called 'key informant bias' (Maxwell, 1996). Qualitative researchers sometimes rely on a small number of informants for a major part of their data, and even when these informants are purposefully selected and the data themselves seem valid, there is no guarantee that these informants' views are typical. Furthermore, sampling decisions should also take into account the research relationship with study participants, the feasibility of data collection, validity concerns, and ethics.

Ethical Considerations

Any social research study raises ethical considerations. This is because the research involves collecting data from people, and about people. There are numerous issues of ethical consideration in social research which have been discussed by various authors. Punch (1994) summarises the main ones as harm, consent, deception, privacy, and confidentiality of data while Christians (2000) suggests the issues of informed consent, deception, privacy and confidentiality, and accuracy. Mile and Huberman (1994) list and discuss thirteen ethical issues: worthiness of the project; competence boundaries; informed consent; benefits; costs and reciprocity; harm and risk; honesty and trust; privacy; confidentiality and anonymity; intervention and advocacy; research integrity and quality; ownership of data and conclusions; and the use and misuse of results. De Vaus (2001) extensively discusses the ethical issues in regard to various research designs. However, this article focuses on some obvious ethical issues with respect to focus groups.

It is unethical to collect information without the acknowledgement of participants, their informed willingness, and expressed consent. Informed consent, the first consideration, implies that subjects are made adequately aware of the type of information, the purpose of

the study and its basic procedures, the identity of the researcher and the sponsor, and the uses to which the data might be put (deVaus, 2001). It is also important that the consent should be voluntary and without pressure of any kind (Kumar, 1999). Prospective participants should not be required, or led to believe that they are required, to participate in a study. Participants should know they can withdraw from the study at any point. However, balance in the amount of detail given to prospective participants also must be maintained (deVaus, 2001; Lewis, 2003). Simply providing detailed descriptions of the study does not mean that respondents will be any more enlightened as a result. Giving too much may deter potential participants because detailed technical information may confuse, distract and overwhelm rather than inform. Furthermore, providing details about the study can distort the way people answer questions and undermine the validity of the findings. Within the requirements of informed consent, it is safest to minimize the amount of detailed information provided before the research is completed.

The proposed conditions for anonymity and confidentiality should be made very clear to participants. Anonymity means 'the identity of those taking part not being known outside the research team' while confidentiality means ëavoiding the attribution of comments, in reports or presentations, to identified participantsí (Lewis, 2003: 67). Kumar (1999) emphasizes that sharing information about a respondent with others for purposes other than research is unethical. Researchers need to make sure that at least the information provided by respondents is kept anonymous. De Vaus (2001) argues that providing assurance of confidentiality is important for methodological as well as ethical reasons. If participants are confident that their responses are truly confidential, researcher can expect that people are more likely to participate in the study. Researchers can also expect that if a person feels that their answers are truly confidential, they would be more likely to provide frank and honest answers. It is essential that information be collected in such a way that confidentiality can be guaranteed. It is also essential that the people involved in collecting, analyzing and reporting the findings

respect scrupulously the confidentiality requirements. Data must be stored in such a way as to preclude any unauthorized access. Tapes and transcripts should not be labeled in ways which could compromise anonymity, and identity information must be stored separately form data (Lewis, 2003).

It is also important to give consideration to ways in which taking part may be harmful to participants, and to take aversive action. This issue arises most clearly in studies on sensitive topics which might uncover painful experiences, and lead people to disclose information which they have rarely or never previously shared (Lewis, 2003). Where there is any danger of harm to participants, the principle of informed consent requires that participants be told of the dangers before participating in the research (De Vaus, 2001). Participants should be given a clear understanding of the issues a study will address before being asked to take part. Moreover, researchers need to be able to make clear judgements about what is and is not relevant, and must avoid prurient or irrelevant detail. A particular dilemma arises where information disclosed during an interview indicates that the participants is at risk of harm.The action the researchers should take may be required by professional codes of conduct in their fields (Lewis, 2003).

Conclusion

We should be aware that on epistemological grounds each method has specific biases in terms of the type of data it yields and thus it is unlikely to generate perfectly concordant evidence. As a result of this concern, several authors argue that the value of triangulation lies in extending understanding through the use of multiple perspectives or different types of methods (Fielding and Fielding, 1984). The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (see Flick, 2002).

Denzin (1989) distinguishes four types of triangulation: data triangulation (variety of data sources), investigator triangulation (several different researchers or evaluators), theory triangulation (multiple perspectives interpreting a single set of data), and methodological triangulation (multiple methods studying a single problem). Since this article discusses methods of data collection, triangulation focuses on 'the use of different methods and sources to check the integrity of, or extend, inferences drawn from the data' (Ritchie, 2003: 43). Lewis (2003) suggests that focus groups can be used at an initial stage to raise and begin to explore relevant issues which will then be carried forward through in-depth interviewing. This would be particularly appropriate in an unfamiliar area to identify issues for coverage. They might involve slightly larger groups than usual and be more flexible in subject coverage giving a freer rein to participants to shape the agenda, to ensure that as full as possible a set of issues are raised. Alternatively, focus groups could be used after in-depth interviewing to discuss the issues at a more strategic level, perhaps focusing on underlying causes and possible solutions. They also offer an opportunity to verify or validate research findings. This may involve checking the completeness of the account gathered through in-depth interviewing, or allowing reflection and comment on the research team's understanding and interpretation of the data. Such focus groups should be conducted with people with expertise in the research subject and able to comment on what has, or has not, emerged.

In sum, triangulation is needed in qualitative research to reduce the risk that research conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific method. Triangulation allows researchers to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations that they develop.

Appendix

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Advantages	Disadvantages
• It is a highly efficient technique for qualitative data collection since the amount and range of data are increased by collecting from several people.	• The number of questions covered is limited, typically fewer than ten major questions can be asked in an hour.
• Natural quality controls on data collection operate; for example, participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other and extreme views tend to be weeded out.	• Facilitating the group process requires considerable expertise.
• Group dynamics help in focusing on the most important topics and it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a consistent and shared view.	• The interview process needs to be well managed or the less articulate may not share their views, extreme views may dominate, and bias may be caused by the domination of the group by one or two people.
• Participants are empowered and able to make comments in their own words, while being stimulated by thoughts and comments of others in the group.	• Conflicts may arise between personalities. Power struggles may detract from the interview and there may be conflicts of status within the procedure.
• The method is relatively inexpensive and flexible and can be set up quickly.	• Confidentiality can be a problem between participants when interacting in a group situation.
• Participants tend to enjoy the experience.	• The results cannot be generalised as they cannot be regarded as representative of the wider population.
• Contributions can be encouraged from people who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own, who feel they have nothing to say or may not usually participate in surveys.	

Sources: adapted and abridged from N. Robinson, 1999

Table 2: Homogeneous versus heterogeneous focus groups

Homogeneous groups	Heterogeneous groups
Participants have a common background, position or experience, which:	Participants differ in background, position or experience, which:
• Facilitates communication	• Can stimulate and enrich the discussion
• promotes exchange of ideas and experiences	• may inspire other group members to look at the topic in a different light
• gives a sense of safety in expressing conflicts or concerns	• may risk power imbalances
• may result in 'groupthink' (unquestioning similarity of position or views)	• can lead to lack of respect for opinions expressed by some members
	• can lead to a dominant participant destroying the group process

Source: derived from J. B. Brown (1999)

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