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Voicing the Less Heard: A Review of Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice

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Abstract

Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice is a powerful text in not only equipping novice researchers with all the stages of designing a focus group, but also facilitating their understanding of the philosophies and in-depth principles of focus group methodology. Although the text seems to have specifically aimed at researchers in health and social sciences, beginning qualitative researchers in other fields, such as educational sciences, can also gain valuable insights. The text also provides detailed accounts of previous research where focus groups have been used as well as an intensive discussion of more specific topics such as focus groups with vulnerable groups, focus groups in cross-cultural research, and virtual focus groups.

Keywords

Focus Group Methodology, Interviewing, Qualitative Research in Health Sciences, Qualitative Research in Social Sciences, Vulnerable Groups in Research, Sensitive Research

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Voicing the Less Heard: A Review of *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*

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Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice is a powerful text in not only equipping novice researchers with all the stages of designing a focus group, but also facilitating their understanding of the philosophies and in-depth principles of focus group methodology. Although the text seems to have specifically aimed at researchers in health and social sciences, beginning qualitative researchers in other fields, such as educational sciences, can also gain valuable insights. The text also provides detailed accounts of previous research where focus groups have been used as well as an intensive discussion of more specific topics such as focus groups with vulnerable groups, focus groups in cross-cultural research, and virtual focus groups. **Key Words:** *Focus Group Methodology, Interviewing, Qualitative Research in Health Sciences, Qualitative Research in Social Sciences, Vulnerable Groups in Research, Sensitive Research.*

Fezile: From rape you get AIDS.
Gugu: AIDS is rape.
Researcher: What's rape?
Nokulunga: When an older person calls you and does bad things to you.
Milondi: A person grabs you when you are going to the shops and then does bad things to you.
Nontobeko: When he's doing bad things to you ... he puts his penis in you with force (Bhana, 2009, p. 596 as cited in Liamputtong, 2011).

This excerpt that took place in a focus group interview among seven to eight years-old young African children in a rural area in South Africa (Bhana, 2009, p. 596) opens Dr. Liamputtong's (2011) *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice* book. From this very first moment of reading these lines, the author's point in the power of focus groups in raising the voices of the less heard populations about the less heard topics was apparent. This is the most salient feature of this book as it has been revisited directly or indirectly throughout the book.

Dr. Liamputtong (2011) puts her position about the nature of focus group methodology from the first pages of the book in chapter one and defends it throughout the book. She argues that, contrary to the practices in marketing research where the moderator in a focus group is the most active person, participants (should) have an active role in a focus group conducted in social sciences. This emphasis directs the reader's attention to the fact that a focus group is more than a group interview and it should value and emphasize group interaction. Therefore, from the first pages of the book, Dr. Liamputtong gives insights to the readers/researchers about how to conduct a focus group

by providing them the underlying characteristics and philosophy behind this methodology.

There are several aspects of this book that make it user-friendly and easy-to-understand for students and/or novice researchers as is also claimed by the author. One such aspect is the well-thought and consistent organization of each chapter. Each chapter starts with *chapter objectives*, which introduce the chapter contents and subheadings. This helps readers to easily skip throughout the book in order to find what is relevant to their needs. Following the chapter objectives, she provides a brief introduction of what the chapter is about and a brief summary of what points she will be discussing in that particular chapter. Each chapter also has a conclusion in which she briefly restates the main arguments she has provided. What was especially valuable to me as a beginning qualitative researcher and a doctoral candidate was the *Tutorial Activities* section at the end of each chapter. With these activities she aims at not only making the reader think over the issues discussed in the chapter but also apply what has been learned to a similar research context. For example, after focus group methodology and practicalities has been discussed in chapter five, the tutorial activity provided is as follows:

You are working on your focus group research project in which you wish to learn about the disability and chronic illness in your local area.

1. How will you prepare your focus groups?
2. How will you run your focus groups?
3. What questions will you use to elicit information from the participants?
4. How will you ensure that you obtain in-depth information?
5. How will you record your focus groups?

Write down your plans and your question guide so that others can duplicate your work in other local areas (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 86).

In sharing this information, she helps the readers to appreciate that the activity enables researchers to think of possible ways of applying what has been learned to an imaginary yet real-life research context. Additionally, these activities facilitate the practical use of this text in qualitative research courses. These activities can be assigned to students so that they can write reflection papers and/or small-scale research proposals. Finally, aside from the general references provided at the end of the book, each chapter ends with a *Further Reading* section. These sections consist of the main references in the field that readers can find with respect to the issues discussed in that particular chapter. This practice allows beginning researchers to easily locate more in-depth information about the topics, should they wish to read more.

Another aspect of this text that makes it appealing for the novice researchers is that each topic is followed by numerous examples from previous research. For example, in chapter six, Dr. Liamputtong (2011) discusses the use of focus group methodology in the health and social sciences, and at the end of this chapter, she points out the relation between the photovoice method and focus group methodology. In this section, she

provides a two-page detailed example of one such research project that has combined the two methods in an exemplary way. By adding such detailed summaries from a variety of previous research in each section of the book, Dr. Liamputtong not only shows evidence of being considerably knowledgeable about previous research with focus group methodology but also gives real-life applications of what she has discussed. This proves to be extremely insightful for novice researchers as they attempt to design their own research studies.

The organization of the content in the book also allows novice researchers to grasp the principles and the practice of focus group methodology in its entirety. While chapter one introduces the methodology in brief, provides a brief historical background, and summarizes other chapters, the book details all the other issues and aspects of this methodology in the remaining chapters. Chapter two provides the underlying frameworks and theories behind it along with the ethical considerations. In this chapter, Dr. Liamputtong (2011) contends that focus group methodology can be situated in three theories: (a) *symbolic interactionism*, in the sense that focus groups allows collective sense-making and co-construction of meaning through interactions of the participants in a group; (b) *feminism*, in the sense that women's voices are empowered in interaction with others in a focus group; and (c) *critical pedagogy*, in the sense that the focus group methodology also allows raising the voices of the oppressed marginalized populations. While Dr. Liamputtong discusses several ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and anonymity, in conventional and virtual focus groups, she does not leave the reader without suggestions and strategies as to how to deal with these issues. Again, she provides examples from her previous research projects as well as others in order to illustrate the real-life applications of these strategies.

At the beginning of chapter three, where Dr. Liamputtong (2011) discusses the focus group methodology and its principles, she reemphasizes the "interaction" element in a focus group by describing it as "a group of people gathered together to discuss a focused issue of concerns" (p. 31). In this chapter, she also addresses the main considerations in choosing this methodology as to the composition of groups (homogeneous vs. heterogeneous, pre-existing vs. constructed, etc.), the length of the groups, and the amount of the participants in a focus group as well as the amount of the focus groups in one research study.

Chapters four and five are reserved for the discussion of the practical considerations before and while conducting a focus group. I can say with confidence that Dr. Liamputtong has answered all the questions a novice researcher such as I might ask. For example, in chapter four, she gives advice on how to recruit and gain access to the participants, whether or not to provide compensation for their time, how to determine where the focus group should be located and at what time, what kind of activities can be implemented in order to warm up the participants as well as to facilitate their interaction and participation, and who should be present in the focus group from the research staff. Moreover, chapter five complements this previous chapter by discussing all the stages in running a focus group from the beginning to the end of the session. What I found the most helpful as a novice researcher in this chapter is the section that is reserved for the types of questions to be asked during a focus group interview. In my opinion, one of the essential skills in a qualitative researcher is knowing how to frame the interview questions. Dr. Liamputtong (2011) categorizes them as follows:

- Probing questions: “Can you say more about what you have just told me?”, “What happened?”, “How did it happen?”, etc.
- Follow-up questions: “You said earlier that you prefer not to have a child; could you tell me more about this?”
- Specifying questions: “What did you actually do when you lost your job?”
- Direct questions: “Have you ever experiences discrimination from others in your community?”
- Indirect questions: “What do most people in your local area think of the ways that older people are treated by their carers?”
- Structuring questions: “We have been talking about the way you take care of your new baby, now I would like to talk about the way mothers feed their babies. Can you please tell me how you feed your baby?”
- Interpreting questions: “You mean that this is how you are treated by your doctor?” (pp. 77-79).

Although she has provided these questions to be used in a focus group, it is obvious that they could also give insights to researchers who wish to conduct individual interviews. Dr. Liamputtong proceeds with addressing more specialized uses of focus group methodology in specific areas with various groups in chapter six thru eight. For example, in chapter six, she gives extensive examples of the ways focus groups are used in health and social science research. She contends that it can be used a) as a self-contained method if the researcher believes that group interaction is necessary in order to access the perspectives of the participants, b) as a supplementary source of data in mixed-method studies, especially to construct survey questions, c) in multi-method studies, especially while triangulating data sources together with other methods. In addition, she also points out the relationship between focus group methodology and other qualitative methods such as needs assessment, community-based participatory research, and the photo voice method.

She then moves on to the use of the methodology on sensitive topics with vulnerable people in chapter seven. In my opinion, it is this section of the book that makes it inviting to the more experienced researcher as well. Dr. Liamputtong (2011) argues that focus group is the most appropriate methodology in unveiling and understanding the lived experiences of the vulnerable populations. According to her, these vulnerable groups may include “children, young people, older persons, ethnic minorities, immigrants, sex workers, the homeless, gay men and lesbians, and women” (p. 108). She also argues that vulnerable people are closely related with sensitive topics that she describes as happens when “the disclosure of opinions, attitudes or behaviors that would normally be kept private is necessitated” (p. 108). Once again, she points out the power of group interaction enabled by focus groups in raising these people’s voices. In this section of the book, she discusses examples from previous research quite extensively in order to show evidence of how focus groups empower the vulnerable populations.

As qualitative research methods have originally been implemented in sociology and anthropology, a researcher may eventually need to conduct research with people from other cultures. By including chapter eight, Dr. Liamputtong (2011) shows that she

has not forgotten those researchers. She discusses issues that could come up during a focus group because of cultural differences, and provides strategies on how to deal with them. For example, in some cultures, perception of time might be different; they might perceive it to be polite when they are late to the focus group interview. Additionally, language differences may pose difficulties for the researchers, and they might need to train bilingual research staff. One interesting point she has made in this chapter was how focus group methodology might be a natural way of communication in some cultures, and that it should be considered as the priority method while doing research with people from these cultures. For instance, she asserts that “women in many Latina families tend to gather in a kitchen to drink coffee, plan the meals and share their worries and stories.” (p. 129). According to her, such people may find it more natural and comfortable to speak in a focus group rather than in an individual interview.

Since researchers have started making use of web-based technologies extensively in conducting their research, Dr. Liamputtong (2011) has devoted chapter nine of her book to virtual focus groups. While she briefly discusses pros and cons of this type of focus groups, she also brings up the essential questions that online research always faces: To what extent are these focus groups? Although she does not directly answer this question, she provides views from previous research and agrees that computer-mediated variations of research methods are inevitable with fast-developing computer technologies. This is also obvious when she provides examples for synchronous and asynchronous focus groups. For example, although this book is very recent, Dr. Liamputtong did not include current video-conferencing tools such as Elluminate, Adobe Connect, or BigMarker for synchronous focus groups that also enable face-to-face interaction. In this chapter, one issue that I would also add is the observation that researchers who use virtual ways of collecting data need to be multiliterate. They need to be computer literate, be familiar with various means of online communication, know conventions and styles of written expressions in online communication, update themselves with web-based tools of conducting both synchronous and asynchronous focus groups, and know how to deal with technical problems and manage technical crisis that might occur with online research.

The final chapter of this book, which is another “practical” chapter, is reserved for managing and making sense of focus group data. In this chapter, she provides detailed descriptions, examples, tips, and strategies of how to transcribe focus group data. She introduces transcribing techniques such as the Jeffersonian system. She also acknowledges the fact that transcribing technique is dependent on the way the researcher wishes to analyze the data. For example, if a researcher wants to conduct discourse analysis, a more detailed transcription that pays attention to intonation, pauses, overlaps, etc. might be necessary, whereas in thematic analysis, a more “readable” transcription will be more appropriate. Importantly, but not surprisingly, she draws our attention to analyzing and making sense of the group interaction in a focus group data, as this is the differentiating feature of focus groups. According to her, as participants interact with each other they co-construct realities, and they dynamically negotiate meaning in focus groups. This inevitably has an effect on the data generated, and thus should be considered during data analysis.

What I valued most in this book was the fact that Dr. Liamputtong (2011) paid more attention to repeatedly equipping readers, and students and/or novice researchers alike, what a focus group essentially is, how it should and should not be treated, and the

power of this methodology in voicing the less heard populations. She has successfully accomplished this by revisiting these principles throughout the book with the specific content that she has chosen to discuss as well as with the specific examples she provided from previous research. I believe this approach is crucial in qualitative research; one has to fully grasp the philosophy behind qualitative research and its methods in order to be an effective qualitative researcher, who makes critical contributions to research as well as to society.

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