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Joint Stories and Layered Tales: Support, Contradiction and Meaning Construction in Focus Group Research

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Abstract

This paper uses focus group data about women's work experiences gathered in five Canadian east coast communities to examine some of the strengths and weakness associated with focus group research. I explore the case made against the use of focus group methods and the basis for some of the critiques aimed at focus group research. By examining the evolving discussions between focus group members, it is possible to understand some of the benefits of group-talk, including the creation of a unique opportunity for interaction, joint meaning creation and contradiction.

Keywords

Focus Groups, Theory, Meaning Construction, Interaction, and Conflict

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Joint Stories and Layered Tales: Support, Contradiction and Meaning Construction in Focus Group Research

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This paper uses focus group data about women's work experiences gathered in five Canadian east coast communities to examine some of the strengths and weakness associated with focus group research. I explore the case made against the use of focus group methods and the basis for some of the critiques aimed at focus group research. By examining the evolving discussions between focus group members, it is possible to understand some of the benefits of 'group-talk', including the creation of a unique opportunity for interaction, joint meaning creation and contradiction. Key words: Focus Groups, Theory, Meaning Construction, Interaction, and Conflict

"The existence of differences between what is said in individual and group interviews is as much a statement about our culture as our methods."

(Morgan, 1996, p.139)

Introduction

My decision to use focus groups as a method for data collection was based both on convenience and on feminist research principles that give value to women's collective narratives (Reinharz, 1992). The study was a part of my work in a community agency and focused on Newfoundland women's work experiences in small workplaces. The funds to conduct the research were limited and since the research was to be conducted in five geographically dispersed communities, it seemed practical to speak to groups of women instead of individuals. I was personally attracted to the idea of focus groups because my previous experience with conducting one-on-one interviews had left me frustrated that each participant did not have the benefit of hearing the story of the other participants. In many instances, a participant's experience seemed like an isolated event to her -- an occurrence that had more to do with personal characteristics or chance than larger social structures. As the researcher, I alone had the privilege of hearing the stories of each participant and the benefit of being empowered by their collective strength. The focus group discussions I planned to conduct were to centre on women's work experiences and it made sense to have those discussions with groups of women who lived in the same community. Mies (1993) suggests that feminist research can be a process of conscientization for both researchers and research participants. She argues that women as researchers and as research participants must begin to collectivize their experience. For me, this process began at the start of the study with the development of a community based research advisory committee and continued into the data collection stage through the use the focus group

method. As a feminist researcher, I wished to facilitate a process where participants were not only speaking to me about their work and health but sharing with each other the multiple dimensions of their work-related experiences in the context of major social and economic change. The close of the Newfoundland cod fishery on the Canadian east coast had dramatically affected whole communities and had major implications for employment in those communities. To me, work issues seemed to be collective, community issues and I wanted women to talk together and hear each other's stories. Focus groups, it seemed, provided an interesting way to collect information from participants without displacing them from their social context.

In this paper I will first discuss some of the perceived problems of using focus groups as a qualitative method. Next, I will explore some theoretical issues that are at the heart of objections to focus group research. Finally, based on excerpts from my own research, I will outline several contributions that the interaction between focus group participants can make to the construction of meaning in a research study.

Coming to Focus Groups

In the social sciences, there seems to be a dark cloud hanging over focus groups. Individual research methods, such as interviews, are common and tend to be viewed as the gold standard of qualitative research. There may be several reasons for this phenomenon. First, the use of focus groups in marketing and business is contradictory to notions of research objectivity and research for research sake. Focus group participants in market research have traditionally been paid and perhaps there is an impression that social desirability drives what participants are willing to say. Related to this point, there is an impression that focus group participants will be swayed by the opinion of others, that group dynamics will threaten the open expression of ideas, and that individual responses will be contaminated by what others say (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). Third, some researchers have used focus groups as a quick, convenient method to get data when time does not permit in-depth interviews (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). This seems contrary to the intent of most qualitative research that aims for quality and depth of information. It is assumed that interviews will yield richer information and reveal a participant's 'true' beliefs or experiences. Fourth, many researchers who use focus groups do not identify *why* they have chosen to use focus groups and do not position this method within their theoretical framework (Wilkinson, 1998). Finally, there are few clear 'standards' for doing focus group research (Fallon & Brown, 2002; Morgan, 1996). How many participants should there be? Can participants know each other or should they be strangers? Should participants be similar to each other in terms of their age, race, and socio-economic status or should they be different? How many groups to conduct? As a result, researchers concerned with validity and reliability may view this seemingly haphazardly approach to data collection with caution and suspicion.

Theoretical perspectives - The challenge of focus groups

Wilkinson (1998) states that there is a disjuncture between the belief that meaning is socially constructed and the use of research methods that decontextualize participants. Jarvinen (2000), drawing from the work of Bourdieu, describes the Western, modernist impulse to order, untangle and essentialize people and personal biographies. However, according to Bourdieu, human life is incoherent, chaotic and filled with contradictions and ironies. Interviews make it easier to give order to participants' stories and experiences. According to Jarvinen (2000) " By

linking together life episodes into long, causal sequences and singling out certain events as especially significant, the interviewer and the interviewee proceed in their common project, the aim of which is to construct a convincing personal life history" (p. 372). The project of constructing a congruous story becomes easier when the interviewee is responding to questions from the interviewer and, propelled by the interviewer, the story moves along in a coherent fashion: like "a sequence of events going in one direction, an advancement from point to point." (p. 372). Although not all form coherent, logical or ordered narratives, interviews appear to allow the interviewer more opportunity to shape and 'get at' an interviewee's 'true' story. Researchers who favour interviews may believe that the best way to get at a true story, feelings or opinions is to extract this information from the participant in private by asking the right questions, leaving the appropriate pauses and creating an ideal atmosphere that will elicit the most real and pure responses (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997; Wilkinson, 1998). The interviewer can of course 'taint' the data and 'bias' the responses elicited. But the potential for bias is even greater in focus groups when interactions are occurring not only between the researcher and the respondent but also between all the participants.

Wilkinson (1998) states that interviews have exploitative potential in that they allow the researcher to control the proceedings, direct the conversation, and impose meaning frameworks within the exchange. Focus groups, at least in the data collection phase, give participants more power to take control of the topic of conversation and shape their own narratives. A loss of control may be uncomfortable from a researcher's perspective because the group may not be addressing questions she wishes them to address or may be dwelling on a subject that the researcher deems unimportant. Further, in some instances, the taking control by research participants can have negative consequences for the interviewer, for example, in the case when a female interviewer is harassed by male participants.

Kitzinger (1994) points out that people's knowledge and attitudes are not necessarily neatly encapsulated in "reasoned responses to direct questions" (p.108). Participants' knowledge, attitudes and feelings are often formed through discussion and interactions. They may be represented by jokes, anecdotes, analogies and off-handed comments. Insofar as people form and change their views and opinions as a result of input and interaction, focus group discussions can provide a social context where knowledge and attitudes are constructed (Wilkinson, 1998). At the heart of the discussion around the validity of focus groups seem to be questions about the construction of knowledge, experience and reality. If group participants, through their interactions with each other construct knowledge, do meanings not change with every new group permutation and dynamic? Using focus groups can challenge positivist, essentialist beliefs to the core by acknowledging that our experiences, meanings, our very selves are unstable, permeable and fluid.

Focus Groups with Women Across Newfoundland

The purpose of the study was to characterize women's experiences in small workplaces across Newfoundland; examine some of the challenges associated with work in small workplaces; discuss how work in small workplaces affects health and well-being, especially in the context of social and economic changes related to the close of the fishery.

A joint community and university project advisory committee was formed to guide the development of this project. A prior discussion about work conditions in small workplaces at a work and health conference helped shape focus group questions. The preliminary list of focus

group questions was sent around to over 80 groups in Newfoundland and Labrador for review and feedback.

Participants were recruited via community based organizations in towns across Newfoundland. This kind of recruitment strategy is recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000). Groups were sent study information and a representative from each organization was asked to help with recruitment. Participants were recruited from the staff, clientele, and other organizational contacts. In some cases women were directly recruited by the community organization. In other cases the community organization, after an initial contact with potential participants, forwarded names to the researcher and the researcher made contact with the potential participants. We approached a variety of thematically diverse agencies, whose main clientele were women, in order to get at a wide range of women's work experience. For example, a focus group was conducted with small business owners who were recruited via a small business association. Another group consisted on women who worked in small nonprofit agencies. This group was assembled by a local women's centre. A criterion for participating in the study was employment in a small workplace (that has between one and twenty employees) in Newfoundland. This was the main thematic link of all the group participants.

Focus groups were conducted in five geographically dispersed communities across the province. In total, 9 focus groups were conducted. On average there were 7 people in each group although the smallest group had 4 participants, while the largest had 13. The group with 13 individuals was difficult to facilitate, thus from that point forward, the groups were kept fairly small to make discussion manageable and informal. The groups all lasted about 1 hr 30 minutes and in total 59 people participated in the study. There was some concern that for reasons of confidentiality women living in small communities would be reluctant to discuss their workplace experiences in a group format. Thus participants were also given the option of submitting written work or participating in a one-on-one interview. Surprisingly, only two women took the option of a one-on-one interview, and this was for convenience, not confidentiality reasons. Most participants seemed to look forward to discussing their experiences in a group format. This perhaps speaks to the community building capacity of group methods.

Dialogue, interaction and meaning-making

Based on the focus groups I conducted with women who worked in small workplaces in Newfoundland communities, I was able to identify several types of interactions that added depth to the data generated. I noticed that groups that consisted of people who knew each other or had several commonalities were richer than focus groups with groups of people who did not know each other or with people who were vastly different from each other. When people in a group knew each other or if they had a similar job, family situation, background, they seemed to be more interested in talking to one another and hearing about each other's experiences. When participants did not know each other or when they had little in common the conversation in the group had to be sustained by the facilitator. The focus group became almost interview-like. Participants would respond to questions posed by the moderator and their responses were most commonly directed to the moderator alone. In these instances, the group atmosphere may have deterred people from disclosing experiences or feelings because the atmosphere was not unlike being in an interview with six other people watching.

However, in groups where a good rapport is established, group interactions can play several roles in the generation of meaning. First, participants in focus groups can be a source of

support for each other. Shared agreement about one issue may encourage a participant to speak about that issue and share things that she would not normally share. Further, by identifying commonalities, it is possible to recognize that there may be larger social, political and economic causes at the root of what were previously considered individual problems (Wilkinson, 1998).

Below is an exchange between some participants who have worked and work in non-profit organizations. The group discusses issues that affect them as employees in these workplaces, such as lack of pensions, few benefits and job insecurity. There is support from group participants through expressions of agreement and one participant exclaims that workers should get benefits ("for God's sake!"). The participants come to the realization that the problem lies with "the system" (the government) that funds the groups and not the actual workplaces. The facilitator is silent during this portion of the conversation.

One of the big drawbacks for most small work places - true? certainly for me here - is that there's no pension. (*Expressions of agreement*) There's no medical leave. I'm going to have to work until I die. There's no two ways about that and....

No insurance.

(*Expressions of agreement*)

....no small work places are like that. I had three children - if they get sick, I've got to get some money somewhere to look out to them because there's not enough money to buy an insurance program for one employee. It makes it too expensive and there's no way to set up a pension plan for one employee.

(*Expressions of agreement*)

Yeah, you haven't got any benefits when you're.... you know, in an organization - and not only that but the organization that we're in here is that we're totally dependent on government funding from year to year to year and it's a shoestring. So I'm always stressed about am I going to have a job after this three months, right. I am always looking for money. I love the work here. I really like the counselling part. I love the drop-in part. I like working here a lot but it is constant stress. As soon as you get the one cheque for the project, you've got to start looking for another project because you got to get your occupation in four months ahead so that the next cheque is going to be in before that one is gone. I mean it's enough to drive you off your head. There's no doubt about it, right.

Well, one year you went months without a pay cheque.

The older you get, the more important that pension is. My friends are retiring with pensions. Now I would've never taught for 30 years just to get a pension in the school system, I can guarantee you; but I should be able to work at this kind of stuff and still retire (inaudible)

And still have benefits for God's sake!

And it's not the fault of the people who are my bosses. It's the fault of how the whole....

The funding.

....system is set up for community based groups.

(Expressions of agreement)

Although the stories told in focus groups included the very personal, community stories were also common. These describe how groups of people in the community (not necessarily those in the focus group) were faced with some obstacle, overcame some problem or had their joint efforts thwarted. Further, the fact that the community story was told collectively added colour and dimension to that story. Participants added comments, built on each other's sentences and constructed a multifaceted picture about their joint experience. Perhaps being in a group incites people to think of a joint problem that people in that community are facing instead of focusing solely on individual problems. Perhaps, as Kitzinger (1994) suggests, when people are with their friends, colleges, family members - people they know - they engage in a 'collective remembering', a synergistic retelling of community culture.

Below is a brief excerpt from a conversation at the end of one of the focus groups about a group that tried to start a large community centre co-operative in an old school and came across various road blocks from the local government. In the narrative, through the women's often overlapping accounts, the reader gets a sense of their vision for the community, their planning and their disappointment when the project did not work.

I mean it would be an amazing, amazing resource to have all these groups under one roof --one-stop shopping, you know.

There's even enough land over there that you could have a community garden, you know...

Then you got people who were going to come in and run a day care and that was their contribution...

That would have been really great.

Like they had their licences and everything. I mean we weren't fooling around with wanting to revolutionize things and do it a different way...

I mean we were really serious about this thing. We were well-organized.

54 Groups.

[...]

Like they said some of the seniors...

Anyway, we don't need to convince you.

Some of the seniors even said like, yeah, we'll come down, we'll run the garden. We'll get out and do the...we want to be useful.

And there's so many kids in Town D that don't have any grandparents and it would've been a wonderful way...that's another thing we talked about, right- is that a lot of kids in Town D particularly when there's a lot of military families here, like their grandparents are thousands of miles away so they never get to interact with seniors...

Seniors are valuable assets but when they're put up in the home there and they're not given anything to do, their health deteriorates.

It was such an answer for every age group: children, men, women, average age, senior citizens - it was such a... we were going to be all-inclusive...We were going to be...

Like it was a little bit too perfect for the town and that's what they didn't like about it.

Focus group participants also generate meaning by challenging each other in ways that would not be possible or ethical for a researcher. Both Wilkinson (1998) and Kitzinger (1994) remark that other focus group participants were able to point out discrepancies between what participants said and their behaviour and challenge them on assumptions that were made. This questioning and challenging encourages participants to expand their descriptions and views and sometimes to justify their feelings.

In this excerpt below, one participant talks about her experience in homecare. Another participant who knows her situation fills in the story in places. A third participant challenges the assumptions made about small workplaces and homecare work. This kind of interaction disputes the assumption that people in a group become overwhelmed by 'groupthink' or can't speak out when someone is saying something they do not agree with. Again, it may also be significant that these participants knew each other. Had they been strangers, the interaction may not have occurred.

No. Well, in my small workplace, there was nothing positive. I know I got to say it - there was nothing positive, okay. It was unfortunate but it was the way the government set it up in the first place. It was doomed for failure (inaudible) set it up and it's 5 years later and there's no improvement. As a matter of fact, it's gone downhill; the program has, because everything they had in the beginning - so it's horrible. There's no way to improve it unless they improve the benefits for the employees. There's no positive side to it - **none**. As a matter of fact, I finished work there about 3 weeks ago.

But you couldn't get away from it because even after you were no longer supervisor....

Because she knew him so well, whether she was home sick or just home, anytime day or night they called her and said, come up here now; we have a problem.

That's unique to that type of work and that specific....

But there's thousands and thousands of people doing that across the province here and all those thousands have no protection and no wonder their health must suffer terribly.

So it's not so much it's a small work place, it's the fact that the threat of being hurt is there and there's no..... Because the threat of being hurt would be there if you ran an institution where there was.... it's not the fact that it's small in my mind - you can correct me if I'm wrong - but it's the fact that the.....

But in an institution, you would have back-up. If the client was beating you up or whatever, you got 4 or 5.... you know, can come and help you out.

(LATER ON....)

In an institution you do have things like, you know, (inaudible). There's no comparison.

But it's not completely just the fact that it's small. Well, I mean it is a volatile situation.

Your work place is going to be much different than say mine in that setting because of the type of work, just like a lot of occupations are more hazardous or whatever.

It wasn't nature [natural] home care.

Because it was more than home care. Like this is even more dangerous than a prison. I mean at a prison if you have a client getting violent, all you got to do is scream or press a buzzer or pick up a phone....They can go and lock him up somewhere for while until he calms down...and you got someone to come and help you within a very short time; but up here it could be that you're stuck in a room and can't get out of the room.

Finally, focus group members can be quite candid about their research experience and how they are feeling. Possibly because focus groups can put more power in the hands of the participants, those participating have reported enjoying the discussions. The excerpt below suggests that participants may also reveal when they are finding a discussion stressful. Swearing, laughter and dramatic exclamations all act to diffuse the tense situation. This kind of interaction would be very unlikely in a one-on-one interview situation. Few participants would feel comfortable expressing such strong feelings to an individual interviewer.

My husband works in a small places all the time and he's always out of work and into work and he works in private business and he gets four months work or six months work or two years go and he doesn't get any work and the trades that he did kind of dried up so he had to go back to school so we suffered through all that. So I mean neither one of us has any real security, which is a difficult way to live when you got youngsters.

You know, when you think of it all.... put it all together, it's almost like....

I wish I wasn't here. I'm getting all fucking stressed out! (laughter)

I think I'm going to go get my tubes tied!

I don't want to be thinking about this shit!

(laughter, jumble of voices)

Summary

In this paper, I have highlighted some of the qualities and merits of focus groups. I do not deny that there are challenges to doing focus group research nor do I argue that focus group research may be appropriate in all instances. However, people do not work or live in socially devoid contexts and knowing what people say, think and feel within groups can be just as important as what they say in personal, one-on-one interviews. As Bloor and colleagues note: "Focus groups provide a valuable resource for documenting the complex and varying processes through which group norms and meanings are shaped, elaborated and applied" (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001, p. 17). What the excerpts above make clear is that the interactions between focus group participants can clarify and enrich understandings of participants' experiences and meanings.

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Article Note

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