9-18-2017

“Something for everyone”: Monique Hennink’s Focus Group Discussions: Understanding Qualitative Research

Stephanie Fitzsimmons

University of South Florida, sadiejaazd@me.com

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Recommended APA Citation

Fitzsimmons, S. (2017). “Something for everyone”: Monique Hennink’s Focus Group Discussions: Understanding Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2454-2456. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.3130>

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Abstract

One question many ask in qualitative research is “Am I doing this right?” In her new book, *Focus Group Discussions: Understanding Qualitative Research*, Monique Hennink expertly shares with the reader suggestions and pitfalls of conducting focus group discussions. She shares these ideas and suggestions through conversation, research and anecdotal stories demonstrating the types of situations that one could experience when conducting a focus group discussion. Hennink dedicates a portion of the book to the importance of a robust methods discussion in supporting one’s write-up; as well as guidelines for writing-up research and assessing others published work (validity, reliability, credibility). Newcomers to this research method will find techniques to make improvements in focus group discussions both in the academic environment and the corporate world. This book has something for everyone.

Keywords

Focus Group, Technique, Focus Group Discussions

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“Something for everyone”: Monique Hennink’s *Focus Group Discussions: Understanding Qualitative Research*

Stephanie Fitzsimmons

University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

*One question many ask in qualitative research is “Am I doing this right?” In her new book, *Focus Group Discussions: Understanding Qualitative Research*, Monique Hennink expertly shares with the reader suggestions and pitfalls of conducting focus group discussions. She shares these ideas and suggestions through conversation, research and anecdotal stories demonstrating the types of situations that one could experience when conducting a focus group discussion. Hennink dedicates a portion of the book to the importance of a robust methods discussion in supporting one’s write-up; as well as guidelines for writing-up research and assessing others published work (validity, reliability, credibility). Newcomers to this research method will find techniques to make improvements in focus group discussions both in the academic environment and the corporate world. This book has something for everyone. Keywords: Focus Group, Technique, Focus Group Discussions*

Monique Hennink’s book, *Focus Group Discussions Understanding Qualitative Research*, guides the reader through the entire lifecycle process of conducting a focus group discussion. Throughout the entire book, she provides anecdotal stories, coupled with research and support to help the reader truly understand and become ready to implement a focus group discussion of their own (if the shoe fits).

I was excited to see this book and read it. As a professional who uses focus groups occasionally to pulse various communities or groups internally, I often debate with the ‘best’ way to plan, conduct and summarize. As a PhD student, I find the use of focus group discussions a compelling tool in my qualitative tool kit. Many of us, experienced or novice, can relate to the questioning of our methods, our analysis and ourselves; throughout this book I found new applications, new perspectives and the reinforcement that each person, each focus group discussion is unique and requires same, but different applications.

The book is divided into six key chapters, each building upon the last - introducing focus group discussions, designing and conducting focus group research, writing focus group methods, writing focus group results, assessing focus group research, and future reading and resources. These chapters help guide a novice focus group researcher, and offer guidance and application to more those more seasoned focus group facilitators.

In Chapter 1, Hennink shares the recommended discussion areas that focus groups are suitable for and when it is not a good idea to use them. Recommended focus group discussion activities include: explore, explain, evaluate, design, gain diversity, understand content, and understand group processes (2014, p. 16). Equally as important are the areas that focus group discussions should not be used, such as: focused personal information conversations/data collection (either narrative or personal experience collection), and sensitive topics in general. On page 28, Hennink provides a table that highlights the appropriate use of focus group discussions vs. in-depth interviews. This conversation and table were helpful to me in providing examples of strengths and weaknesses of focus groups, while at the same time providing a clear direction for when an opportunity for the method would lend itself to success.

Chapter 2 discusses designing and conducting focus group research. It’s important to point out here, that Hennink starts off the chapter with guidance that is often heard in qualitative

research “there is no definitive correct way to conduct focus group research” (2014, p. 35). Reading through here, I was taken on a path of understanding how to plan for the focus group discussion and then the actual conducting of the focus group. Hennink is careful to share how to prepare for the focus group discussion (i.e., research, roles of team members, recommended group size, group composition considerations, and methods for participant recruitment). She broaches the topic of intentional, purposeful, selection of group participants and the need to create that rich information type environment with the appropriate selection of individuals. For those that enjoy charts, Hennink provides a table (pages 44 & 45) with various recruitment strategies consolidated to a few sentences. If one has never conducted a focus group discussion, the diagrams and examples with discussion reinforce appropriate and considerate techniques for the facilitator to use when conducting a focus group. I found the group activities table in the chapter to be quite helpful; it provided examples of various group activities that can be conducted in order to help spur conversation between participants. The concept of note taking and recording the focus group discussion is also discussed in this chapter. Later on the chapter, Hennink led me through the various ways that data capturing can occur and the best way to incorporate the note taker/recorder in the event without infringing upon the discussion. Lastly, in this chapter, she reviews the various research approaches that can be used when analyzing focus group discussion data, such as: Qualitative Content Analysis, Thematic Analysis, and Constructivist Approaches.

All of this leads to the writing portion of the research, Hennink reiterates what many who have been exposed to qualitative data tout – the methods section is the make or break of the research. She states, without sounding repetitive or condescending, the need to be concise yet descriptive and thorough in describing the methods behind the focus group discussion and the data and literature that supports it – the what, how and why. Chapter 3 is rich with examples of successful focus group research, as well as common challenges and recommendations for avoiding them. The importance of this section is addressed towards the end of the book when Hennink discusses ways to review and evaluate other’s papers. Hennink reinforces the importance of focusing on the key messaging, intended audience and effective presentation when preparing for writing the report. These will help focus what is written and how it is written. Throughout Chapter 4, I was exposed to various challenges in the writing-up of results from the focus group discussion. Hennink stresses the importance of structuring one’s argument and various types of arguments. Her table on pages 137 and 138 look at development, mechanical, comparative and causal arguments. The importance of appropriate quotation use and guidelines are helpful to anyone conducting a focus group discussion analysis write-up. Quotes should be used to supplement the conversation and provide depth and exposure to the participant’s experiences; researchers need to be cognizant of using these quotes in ethically appropriate ways.

The book concludes with a strategic look into assessing research. Here Hennink highlights some of the struggles within the qualitative community regarding criteria, assessment, appropriate/effective strategies and the concepts of validity and reliability. Qualitative data differs from quantitative data, the latter, which is steeped in statistics, and numerical data. Towards the end of the chapter, I appreciated her guideline of sorts to assist in assessing focus group data. This table addresses the components that should be part of a focus group discussion report – study purpose, research design, data collection, data, study results, discussion & conclusion. Throughout this set of guidelines, questions are posed to help remind me, as the reviewer, to reflect and come to a conclusion regarding the quality and usefulness of the focus group discussion results.

For skimmers or experienced focus group discussion facilitators, the key points summary at the end of each chapter are welcome summaries to highlight. I applaud Hennink

for weaving throughout the book examples and a focus on ethical focus group discussion practices throughout the lifecycle.

In short, reading this book helped me to see areas of focus group discussions that I can improve upon. The toggling between information sharing and examples to illustrate the point is seamless. I felt myself drawn into the examples and upon my second reading of the book using skills acquired from the first read to analyze and reflect more deeply on Hennink's message. Readers of all experience levels will find something in this book.

References

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Author Note

Stephanie Fitzsimmons is pursuing her PhD at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include: self-efficacy, gender differences in self-efficacy, STEM and self-efficacy. Stephanie has degrees and certificates in business, math, education and six sigma. She is the STEM Education Manager for a global security company. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: fitzsimmonss@mail.usf.edu.

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Article Citation

Fitzsimmons, S. (2017). "Something for everyone": Monique Hennink's focus group discussions: Understanding qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2454-1456. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss9/12>