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Abstract

Focus groups are a commonly used methodology to explore ideas in a group setting with a researcher acting as moderator. However, in some contexts the presence of a moderator may unduly influence the responses of focus group participants. I report on the use of unmoderated focus groups, a modification of the traditional focus group methodology. Unmoderated focus groups are made up solely of participants in the research study and as such remove the direct influence of the researcher. I found that this methodology uncovered richer identity stories than interviews did alone. In this article, I present the methodology as well as potential constraints for its use in qualitative research.

Keywords

Qualitative Research Methods, Focus Group, Unmoderated Focus Group, Interview, Group Interview, Narrative Research, Identity

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Unmoderated Focus Groups as a Tool for Inquiry

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Focus groups are a commonly used methodology to explore ideas in a group setting with a researcher acting as moderator. However, in some contexts the presence of a moderator may unduly influence the responses of focus group participants. I report on the use of unmoderated focus groups, a modification of the traditional focus group methodology. Unmoderated focus groups are made up solely of participants in the research study and as such remove the direct influence of the researcher. I found that this methodology uncovered richer identity stories than interviews did alone. In this article, I present the methodology as well as potential constraints for its use in qualitative research. Keywords: Qualitative Research Methods, Focus Group, Unmoderated Focus Group, Interview, Group Interview, Narrative Research, Identity

Focus groups have their roots in the world of marketing research, and are widely used in other fields of research including education research (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). Parker and Tritter (2006) noted that with increasing use there was also a rise in using the terms focus group and group interview interchangeably. They argued that these two terms are not interchangeable and differ in terms of the role of the researcher. In group interviews the researcher is a true investigator and the interactions are more between the researcher and participant than between participants (Parker & Tritter, 2006). In contrast, during a true focus group the researcher plays the role of moderator and interactions are between participants (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups are intended to allow deep exploration of a particular topic with a moderator (usually the researcher) acting as a guide for the conversation and managing the levels of individual participation (Parker & Tritter, 2006; Stewart & Shamdsani, 1990). The moderator focuses the discussion by asking initial and follow-up questions that hone in on the topic of interest and also manage participant interactions (Parker & Tritter, 2006).

The unmoderated focus group described here, does not explicitly fit the definition of either a group interview or a focus group since I (the researcher) was not physically present. However, given that its intention was to allow a deep exploration of participants' student teaching experiences and the focus was on the conversation that occurred between the participants I consider it to be a type of focus group. Furthermore, since the only direct role that I took was in starting the group and providing some guiding questions, I use the term unmoderated focus group to describe this research methodology as a focus group, which does not have a moderator present.

Several researchers have more recently drawn attention to critical considerations for researchers employing focus group methodologies. These have ranged from recruitment and composition of focus groups to the analysis of data collected through focus groups.

Criticisms of focus groups have included ideas related to the nature of participant recruitment as well as the use of focus groups for reasons related primarily to ease and efficiency (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Participants in focus groups should be chosen with attention to the goals of data collection, rather than with concerns about convenience (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Parker and Tritter (2006) also suggested that researchers pay critical attention to rationale for using focus groups as a data source as well the impact of participant selection.

The role of moderators in focus group interviews has been recognized as an important influence on the dynamic of the group for many years (Merton et al., 1990). Researchers playing the role of moderator in a focus group have the power to influence the dynamic in direct and indirect ways. They may directly manage how participants share through directed questioning or encouraging group members to contribute to the conversation. Furthermore, the presence of a moderator may indirectly impact what group members are willing to share in this setting. These influences on group dynamics are important considerations for researchers using focus groups as a method of data collection. In an unmoderated focus groups, removing the moderator, may have positive as well as negative impacts on the group dynamics.

Finally, Farnsworth and Boon (2010) noted that group dynamics in focus groups are often not considered as part of the analysis of focus group data. They went on to describe the importance of attending to these interactions and the dynamics of the groups that they reveal. Furthermore, they noted that the focus, participants, context, and moderation of the group may all play a role in determining the degree to which group dynamics may impact the interactions in the focus group. In an unmoderated focus group, the group dynamics have the potential to play an outsized role since there is no moderator present to mitigate any issues that might arise between participants. Therefore, in an unmoderated focus group it is even more critical that researchers attend to the selection of participants. Furthermore, the researcher must carefully consider whether the unmoderated focus group is likely to offer a significant methodological advantage for the object of study. For the example described in this paper, the object of study was the narrated identities of prospective elementary teachers.

Narrated Identities

The construct of identity is one that has been conceptualized in various ways by psychologists and social scientists. Education researchers have also utilized identity development as connected to learning and participation in learning contexts (Chen & Mensah, 2018; Luehmann, 2007). The narrated identity model defines identity as the stories that are told by and about an individual (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Sfard and Prusak noted that identity narratives are influenced not only by who is telling the story, but also to whom the story is being told. This may present a challenge for researchers in that the stories that are heard by the researcher may differ from stories that an individual tells to an audience that is not the researcher. For example, a prospective teacher might tell their peers a story about being a science teacher that is different from the story they tell a researcher conducting an interview about what it means to be a science teacher.

In my research with a group of prospective elementary teachers, I was interested to see if I might be able to mitigate my influence as the recipient of their stories. To this end, although I would be the ultimate recipient of the stories in recorded form, I removed my physical presence from the room. The unmoderated focus group methodology was a result of this desire to mitigate my influence. My use of the unmoderated focus group was explicitly designed to elicit narratives that participants might tell their peers since the audience for an identity narrative plays a role in the content of the narrative (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). The research question I had about using the unmoderated focus group was: In what ways, if any, do the stories about being a teacher of science told by prospective elementary teachers to their peers in an unmoderated focus group vary from the stories told during a one-on-one interview?

Methodology

This study used a case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to explore the experiences of three prospective elementary teachers during student teaching. The unmoderated focus group

was one method of data collection for my study that also included individual interviews and classroom observations of the participants.

Participants and Context

The participants in the unmoderated focus group were three prospective elementary teachers (Emmy, Cecelia, and Valentina) who were nearing the end of their student teaching semester. All prospective elementary teachers in the teacher preparation program who were student teaching during the semester of data collection were invited to participate in the study. The three participants represent a convenience sample (Marshall & Rossman, 2010) of interested student teachers who were working in schools that granted permission for the research to occur. Prior to this semester they had all completed their course work as elementary education majors and following student teaching would graduate with a B.S. in Elementary Education and be certified to teach elementary school. Additionally, two of the prospective teachers, Emmy and Cecelia, were also pursuing the English as a Second Language endorsement that would certify them to work with students who were English Language Learners.

Prior to the unmoderated focus group, I had conducted individual interviews with each of the prospective teachers and observed them as they taught science lessons to the students in their student teaching classrooms. Interviews had also been conducted with the mentor teacher with whom each prospective teacher was working with in student teaching, the university student teaching supervisor for each prospective teacher, and the instructor of the science methods course that the prospective teachers had taken prior to their student teaching semester.

Data Collection and Analysis

The unmoderated focus group took place in a conference room on the campus of the university where the three prospective teachers were enrolled. The room was arranged so that the video camera was positioned on the opposite side of the table from where the participants were seated and so that it remained in view of all participants. At the beginning of the unmoderated focus group I told the participants that the goal was for them to have an opportunity to talk with each other about their experiences teaching science. I provided them with a set of questions (see Table 1) printed on individual cards and told them that these questions could be used as conversation starters if necessary, but they did not have to be used. I told the participants where I would be so that they could let me know when they had finished their conversation, I started the video recording, and then I left the room so that the participants could start their unmoderated conversation. The unmoderated focus group lasted approximately 72 minutes.

Table 1

Prompts for Unmoderated Focus Group

How have your experiences teaching science been? What has gone well? Have you had any challenges?

How would you describe yourself as a teacher of science right now? Why would you describe yourself that way?

When you think about yourself five years from now, how would you describe the kind of science teacher you will be?

How would you describe the school you are teaching in right now? What are your students like?

How would you describe the school you hope to teach in after you graduate? What do you imagine your students will be like in this school?

I began analysis by transcribing the conversation that occurred during the unmoderated focus group. I then applied the three layers of coding that I used for the analysis of all of the interview data that was part of the study. The first layer of coding was to determine if the stories that the prospective teachers told were about themselves in relation to teaching science or in relation to teaching students. There were some stories in this layer that were coded as falling into both categories as well as some that were coded as being about neither of these two things. The second layer of coding consisted of labeling the stories as being about who the prospective teachers were as student teachers or as being about the teachers they hoped to be in the future. The third and final layer of coding consisted of open coding for the focus of the stories that were told by the prospective teachers. These open codes were then condensed into themes made up of related codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2010).

An Example of the Methodology – Prospective Elementary Teachers’ Identities as Teachers of Science

In the analysis of the unmoderated focus group as compared to one-on-one interviews, two patterns emerged in the findings. In this section, I will present findings related to these patterns. First, I will describe how the analysis of the unmoderated focus group confirmed findings from the one-on-one interviews. Additionally, I will share how the unmoderated focus group offered insights that were not present in one-on-one interviews.

Confirmation

One pattern that emerged during the unmoderated focus group was that participants repeated aspects of stories that they had told during a one-on-one interview, thus offering confirmation about this aspect of their identities. One example of this was when Emmy talked about the kind of teacher of science that she hoped to be in the future.

In her initial interview, Emmy described two approaches to teaching science and the kind of teacher she hoped to be.

There’s two things in science that I’ve seen and I don’t know necessarily which one I would be doing, but there’s one where kids ask questions. They ask their own questions and then it’s their job to do the research and find their own answers and that’s usually related to science . . . The other type of a classroom is where you already have it set up, like the investigation or the FOSS [Full Option Science System Curriculum] kits. Um, and then I’m hoping to still, still be somewhat of [a] facilitator. And say, “Okay, today we’re going to try to do this and then see what happens.” or maybe provide information for them, but then I still want there to be talking and experimenting so the kids are doing most of the learning on their own.

While she seemed uncertain about which approach she would use, Emmy indicated that she wanted to be a “facilitator” as a teacher.

During the unmoderated focus group, Emmy and Cecelia talked about the kind of discussions they hoped to have in their future classrooms.

Emmy: But I wouldn't want to just be talking at them [students] or lecturing at them. I would want them to be working and experimenting and learning for themselves and learning from each other and I might be the facilitator of a discussion once we're done doing some of the experimenting and have groups

share with each other and learn from each other. I would just wanna be giving them the resources and them be doing the learning on their own.

Cecelia: I think that's one of my weaknesses because I am still learning how to conduct science talks.

Emmy: That's why it's five years from now. I told [blinded] now I can't do that. Five years, hopefully.

Here Emmy repeated her story about the kind of teacher she hoped to be in the future and added confirmation that this was something she had shared with me in an earlier interview.

Stories like Emmy's that were repeated in interviews as well as in the unmoderated focus group offered support for these aspects of their identities. They were things that came up not only when they told me about their identities as teachers of science, but also with their peers. The repetition supported the notion that these aspects were particularly salient for the prospective teachers' identities as teachers of science.

Additional Insights

Beyond offering confirmation of things that participants shared in one-on-one interviews, the unmoderated focus group also provided additional insights which did not come up as part of the interview. One example of this was the way in which Cecelia talked about working with her mentor teacher.

In the interview that occurred after my observations of Cecelia's science lessons, Cecelia talked about why she had changed the order of the segments of her lesson after being interrupted by her mentor teacher, Antonia.

It's like these kids are ELLs [English Language Learners] and they're trying to learn the English language and for the scaffolding portion of this, they needed that extra you know the SIOP [Structured Immersion Observation Protocol] part of it where I was showing them pictures and writing the word and writing the information for them. And so, it was a very wise, she's [Antonia's] very wise, she's taught ELD [English language Development] for how long—and so I could see the wisdom in that and it at that point I was like, "I have it this way." But—my whole mind, my mind, my track of organization was like so different, you know because she wanted me to scaffold with them.

When Cecelia planned her lesson, she had a clear vision for how she wanted to organize the lesson. However, when Antonia interrupted her, Cecelia changed her plan to fit with how Antonia would have organized the lesson. In the post-lesson interview Cecelia explained this change as deferring to Antonia's experience and expertise in teaching students who were English Language Learners.

During the unmoderated focus group, the three prospective teachers were discussing challenges they had had with teaching science. In this discussion the idea of starting a science lesson with a science talk in which students were encouraged to share their initial ideas. Cecelia shared her opinion about science talks and a challenge she faced with trying to implement them in her student teaching placement:

I like that. It's just, it's so hard for me to do that [science talk] 'cause my mentor's like, "Read the objective first [pounds hand into other hand] read the [gesture again]. Do this first, do this next [gesture again]" [hand gesture like stop sign] Let me teach [gesture again] Let me teach.

Here Cecelia expressed her frustration with the way her mentor teacher exerted control over the lessons that Cecelia wanted to teach. This frustration added additional insights to understanding the relationship between Cecelia and her mentor teacher Antonia that were not available from the one-on-one interview alone.

Stories like Cecelia's gained depth through the inclusion of things that came out during the unmoderated focus group. During my observation and one-on-one interview with Cecelia I had hints that Antonia exerted control over how Cecelia was teaching science lessons, but without the unmoderated focus group I would not have gained the additional insight that at times Cecelia felt like this control was keeping her from being able to teach science in the way that she wanted to teach.

Not Different, but Deeper

The examples presented here demonstrate that in the unmoderated focus group, I did not elicit wholly different identity narratives for the participants, but rather stories that provided deeper understandings about the participants' identities as teachers of science. These deeper insights proved invaluable in constructing more nuanced case studies of each of the prospective teachers' identities as teachers of science.

Constraints of the Methodology

One potential constraint that was raised by another researcher with whom I shared this methodology was that it implied that my participants were untrustworthy. I disagreed with this idea because in this particular research the understanding of identity was framed as the stories that are told about who someone is. As Sfard and Prusak (2005) pointed out, the storyteller as well as the audience for this story play important roles in the stories that are told. The goal of the unmoderated focus group was to provide, to some extent, a different audience for the identity stories told by my participants. This did not mean that I did not trust the stories that participants were telling me in our one-on-one interviews, but rather that I recognized that the story they told in a different setting might include other aspects as a result of being for a different audience.

Another constraint is that this methodology presents researchers with a level of uncertainty about the data that will be elicited from the participants. By removing the researcher from the role of moderator of the focus group, the researcher also gives up the ability to manage the interactions of the group as well as the ability to refocus the group or pursue a particular line of conversation. It is possible that without a moderator the conversation within the unmoderated focus group will stray from the intended topic which may negatively impact the value of the data for the researcher. As Parker and Tritter (2006) noted, the role of the moderator should be carefully considered in focus groups. Removing that individual could have potentially negative effects on the results. However, the value of the data collected in an unmoderated focus group may outweigh this concern.

In an effort to mitigate any negative impacts that might arise from the lack of a moderator, there are several steps a researcher might take. Providing a set of questions as a starting point for the discussion can help focus the group conversation on topics of interest to the research. I used this technique in my unmoderated focus group with the understanding that it might also constrain the conversation of the participants. Of more concern is the potential that without the presence of a moderator to ensure equitable participation, one participant might dominate the conversation. To help mitigate this potential, participants in the unmoderated focus group were selected with attention to potential power dynamics that might be present. In

the unmoderated focus group described in this paper all participants were at the same point in their teacher preparation program and had had similar classroom and educational experiences. While this consideration does not address differences in conversational styles amongst participants, it did mitigate power dynamics that might favor a participant with more experience than the others.

Conclusion

Unmoderated focus groups have the potential to offer researchers deeper understandings of participants' stories and experiences than what might be available using traditional interviews and/or focus groups. In using this methodology, researchers should attend to the constraints described here and make sure to take appropriate measures to mitigate these constraints. Finally, while I believe that unmoderated focus groups can offer great benefits to researchers, I would caution against using them as the sole data collection methodology due to the inherent uncertainty that is present in this methodology.

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