Appreciating the FGD

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Focus Group Discussion

Outline

• Definition of FGD
• Historical Overview of FGD
• Applications of FGD
• The FGD Process
  – Preparation – research problem, formulating questions, data analysis plan, etc.
  – During the FGD – the facilitator, the recorder/documentor; issues and problem
  – Data analysis – before, during, after the FGD; issues and problems
• “mock FGD” – going through the FGD process
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What is a Focus Group Discussion

- Discussion-based interview that produces a particular type of qualitative data. It involves the simultaneous use of multiple respondents to generate data and it is the ‘focused’ (i.e. on an ‘external stimulus’) and relatively staged (i.e. by a ‘moderator’) character of the focus group method separates it from other types of group interviewing strategy. According to some, a focus group is no more than a well-targeted and well-designed meeting. (Millward, 1995)
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What is a focus group?

• A special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures
• Typically composed of 7 to 10 participants who are selected on the basis of certain common characteristics relevant to the topic of the focus group
• Repeated several times with different people
What is a focus group?

- A carefully planned discussion designed to obtain the perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.
- Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion (has the benefits of group processing).
- A focus group study will consist of a minimum of 3 focus groups but could involve as many as several dozen groups.
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History of FGD

• (Debus) FGDs originated from developments in the disciplines of literary criticism psychoanalytic theory

• These techniques were then applied to the field of market research in “motivational research” in the 1930s
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• Bailey (1994) describes FGD as a recent development in the 1980s;

• FGDs started to become popular in the 1970s and enjoyed tremendous growth in the 1980s and ‘matured’

• became extremely popular in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s
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• Conaco (1999) the kind of FGD in use today started taking shape only in the second half of the 20th century;

• the shift from semi-structured interview with individual respondents to interviews with groups of respondents paved the way for the FGD
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Early applications of FGD
• Market research (in-depth exploration of consumer views and behavior)
• Tool for evaluative research

Recent applications of FGD
• Used as an independent data gathering method as well as to complement data from larger surveys and quantitative research
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FGD as a gender-sensitive method

• Used by feminists in participatory action and transformative research
  → Pay closer attention and importance on differences and diversity while attempting to understand common experiences and viewpoints
  → Value the process of data collection that is dialogic and non-hierarchical (‘breaking the boundaries between the researcher and the researched’), and maximize FGD’s potential for consciousness raising of participants and as a venue for negotiations
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Current Applications of FGD

• to generate culture-sensitive and gender-sensitive themes and variables for use in more structured (e.g. quantitative) research
• To enrich and understand the context of quantitative data
• To obtain data very quickly (e.g. RRA) for policy and program development
• In feminist research, FGD is appropriate for exploring the depth and expanse of women’s experiences and probing into aspects of life that are commonly considered under the rubric of ‘private matter’ or ‘personal trouble’
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Some situations when FGD could be used

• There is a need to find out the degree of consensus on a topic
• There is a need for a friendly research method that is respectful and not condescending to a target audience
• Insights are needed in exploratory or preliminary studies
• Investigating complex behavior and motivations (degree of complexity typically not available in other methods)
Some Situations when FGDs should **NOT** be used

- Statistical data is required (FGD samples are usually small and unrepresentative)
- Other methodologies can produce either better quality information or more economical information of the same quality
- The researcher cannot ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information (controversial topics such as premarital sex, extramarital affair or practice of abortion)
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Some Situations when FGDs should **NOT** be used

- The environment is highly emotionally charged and data gathering using FGD may intensify the conflict
- The researcher has lost control over critical aspects of the study which makes the study prone to manipulation and bias
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Advantages of FGD

- It is a socially-oriented research procedure; place people in natural, real-life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies.
- The format allows the moderator to probe; this flexibility to explore unanticipated issues is not possible within a more structured questioning sequences typical of surveys.
- The technique is easily understood and the results seem believable to those using the information.
- They can be relatively low cost.
- Can provide speedy results.
- They enable the researcher to increase the sample size of qualitative studies.
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Limitations of FGD

• Researcher has less control in the group interview compared to individual interview; participants influence one another and this sharing of control may result to some inefficiencies such as detours in the discussion and raising of irrelevant issues
• Data are more difficult to analyze; comments must be interpreted within the social environment of group interaction
• Needs carefully trained interviewers/ moderators
• Groups can vary considerably; FG tends to have unique characteristics; advisable to include enough groups to balance idiosyncrasies of individual sessions
• Groups may be difficult to assemble
• Must be conducted in environment conducive to conversation (logistical problem)
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Steps in the FGD Process

A. Preparatory Stage
   1. Determine the purpose/objectives of the research.
   2. Determine the suitable method/s for investigating the research problem other than the FGD.
   3. Decide whether the FGD will be the sole data-gathering technique or will be used together with other techniques.
   4. Determine the participants. Who will be the participants? How will they be recruited? What are their personal characteristics? (determine whether mixed genders and age groups will affect FGD – youth will defer to elders; women will be inhibited in expressing opinion and defer to the men)
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Steps in the FGD Process

A. Preparatory Stage

5. Determine the number of groups and number of participants per group?

6. Structure the FGD to ensure a free-wheeling flow of ideas.

1. Selecting the moderator/interviewer. Preparing moderator/interviewer.

2. Selecting the documentor and how to document aside from notes and observations, e.g. video or audio documentation.
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1. Preparing the guide questions. Choosing the questioning strategy -- Decide whether you will use a topic guide or the questioning route.

2. Deciding on the venue of the FGD and making arrangements for the participants’ snacks and/or tokens, recording materials and other logistical needs.
   - Venue should be conducive to free-flowing conversation
   - Participants should be amenable to the documentation (aside from taking notes and observation and audio tapes it is ideal if participants will be amenable to video documentation; primary consideration include unobtrusiveness and comfort zone of participants)
   - Consider giving out modest token or compensation for loss in income opportunities whenever necessary.
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11. Determining the data analysis process/strategy to be employed. (manual or with the aid of computer software, e.g. Qualitrans, Acculine, QDA MINER); transcript-based, tape-based, note-based or memory-based analysis

12. Determining the reporting, validation and dissemination of the research findings. (conventional or more creative techniques such as drama, dance, etc.)
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Questioning Strategy

Topic Guide
• List of topics or issues to be covered in the FGD;
• Often used by skilled and professional moderators in marketing research studies

Advantages
• Speed—can be developed more quickly
• More conversational—language comfortable and familiar to moderator
• Spontaneity—seems more spontaneous as moderator can reweave previous comments into future questions (requires skill)

Disadvantages
• More difficult analysis (questions may be asked differently in different groups and comparative analysis becomes more difficult; sometimes slight changes in wording result in major changes in meaning)
• Limited feedback when pilot testing (can be very cryptic and subject to variation in meaning and usage in complete sentences)
• Inconsistency between moderators (ask questions in different ways with dramatically different meanings)

© Beginning moderators should avoid topic guide
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Questioning Route
• Sequence of questions in complete conversational sentences
• Often preferred in the public, non-profit and academic environment

Advantages
• Increased sponsor/funder confidence because the questions address the topics precisely as intended
• Quality analysis – produces more efficient analysis because it minimizes subtle differences in questions that could modify the intent
• Enhanced consistency (even if many different moderators)

Disadvantages
• Awkwardness (unless the moderator is comfortable with the questions, they can seem stilted, insincere and lacking in spontaneity
• Slower to develop or prepare to achieve the exact content desired by the sponsor
• Potential false impression – may give the sponsor the impression that you will ask the question “exactly” as written, which is often not the case
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Developing Questions for Focus Groups

• Ask questions in a conversational manner in order to create and maintain an informal and comfortable environment

• The wording of the questions should be in a direct, forthright, comfortable and simple—easily understandable, easy to ask (not stumbling over the words) and the language must be appropriate for the intended audience
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Developing Questions for Focus Groups

• EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS are: CLEAR, BRIEF, REASONABLE
  – CLEAR QUESTIONS are usually SHORT, ONE-DIMENSIONAL and JARGON-FREE
• UNIDIMENSIONAL – In what ways was the program useful and practical? “Useful” and “practical” may be synonymous to the moderator but may mean different things to the participants
• CLARITY – words must be understandable to the participants; acronyms, jargon and technical language may be confusing to participants – need to share/group process, revise, test, revise, test the questions (with brainstorming team, research team, sponsor of the study, potential participants)
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Categories of Questions

→ Not all questions in FGD are equal; some are trivial and serve as prelude to other important questions; some do not need analysis; other questions are of utmost importance and require lengthy and intense analysis; some questions are asked rapidly while others are done leisurely; some questions may be easy to ask while others may be difficult to ask and require special skills from the moderator

• Opening question
• Introductory
• Transition questions
• Key questions
• Ending question
OPENING QUESTION/S

• Designed to be answered quickly (usually in 30 seconds) to make people feel comfortable by identifying shared characteristics of participants

• Preferable that questions be based on facts rather than on attitudes or opinions (more difficult and takes time to answer)

• Usually not a discussion question but strictly a process to encourage talking, e.g. demographic characteristics (previously established in participants profile)

• Usually not intended to be analyzed; intention is to establish a sense of community in the group e.g., what is your ethnolinguistic identification and occupation or source of livelihood and tell us about your community volunteer work
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Introductory questions

• Introduce the general topic of discussion and/or provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on experiences and their connection with the overall topic
• Fosters conversation and interaction among the participants but not critical to the analysis – begins the focus of the topic
• Open-ended question that allows participants to tell how they see or understand the phenomenon
• Usually asks for a definition, explanation or overview how people have experienced a product or experience

Example – Members of the family and their personal circumstances – studying or working, location of school or workplace
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TRANSITION QUESTIONS

• Move the conversation towards the key questions of the study
• Help participants envision the topic in a broader scope; serve as the logical link between the introductory questions and the key questions
• Often asks participants to go into more depth than introductory questions about their experiences; make the connection between the participant and the topic of investigation

Example – who among your family migrated or left your village to study or work (or for other reasons)
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KEY QUESTIONS

• Key questions drive the study
• Typically consists of 2 to 5 questions; usually the first questions to be developed by the research team and require the greatest attention in the analysis
• May require 10 to 15 minutes each
• Moderator may need to use pauses and probes; usually begin about one-third or halfway into the FGD

Example –
what are the reasons for (out) migration from your community
What are the effects and consequences of (out) migration
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ENDING QUESTIONS

• Bring closure to the discussion; enable participants to reflect on previous comments; critical to the analysis

• Three types:
  – all-things-considered – allows participants to state final position on critical areas of concern, identify which aspects are most important, in need of action, clarify position at the conclusion of the discussion; often answered by all members of the group; helpful in analysis because it can be used to interpret conflicting comments and assign weight to what was said; what the participants consider as important
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– Summary questions – is asked after the moderator or assistant moderator has given a brief oral summary (2 to 3 minutes) of the key questions and the big ideas that emerged from the discussion; after the summary, the participants are asked regarding the accuracy of the summary; this question also plays a critical role in analysis

Example– Is this an adequate summary?
Did I correctly describe what was said?
How well does that capture what was said here?
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How to Give a Summary at the end of the FGD

• Before the focus group, familiarize the key questions and time moderator will spend on each question
• Be clear about the purpose of the FGD as the summary should tie closely to this purpose
• Take notes with two things in mind: (1) notes that will help you provide a brief oral summary (2)notes for detailed analysis after the FGD
• Begin oral summary with most important findings
• Begin summary with findings (what was actually said). Attempt to capture common themes but also acknowledge differing points of view. This repeats very briefly what was said. Consider offering an interpretation to attach additional meaning and go beyond actual words.
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• Listen for what was not said but might have been expected. …”Some things were not mentioned such as…and I am assuming that they are important. Watch out for reactions from participants.

• Cite key phrases used in the discussion. This demonstrates connectedness and careful listening.

• Keep the summary to 3 minutes or less to keep the interest of the participants.

• After the oral summary, ask the participants “is this summary complete? Or does this sound ok to you? Does this capture what was discussed?
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FINAL QUESTION

• “insurance question” to ensure that critical aspects have not been overlooked
• The question begins with a short overview of the purpose of the study
• Final question: “Have we missed anything? Is there anything that we should have talked about but did not?” (needs sufficient time at the conclusion of the FGD; 10 minutes)
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PROBE Questions

• Technique to elicit additional information (would you explain further? Can you give me an example? Please describe what you mean?)
• Decide if probing is necessary; weigh the time needed for probing vis-à-vis the other questions
• Excessive probing may stifle group conversation
• Use probes when necessary and preferably early in the discussion

Follow-up Questions

• Linked to the preceding question by logic or reason; seeks additional information but more deliberate; example: what is the major problem in the community? THEN what are the causes? Is violence (or substance abuse) a growing concern in the community? THEN what should be done about it?
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PROBE Questions

UNPLANNED

• In the course of the FGD, the moderator may think of a question which she/he thinks might be relevant to the study; may not have been part of the plan or conceptualized by the team but prompted by comments of participants;

• can be beneficial but it is often preferable to withhold them until near the end of the FGD
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B. The FGD Process

• The two key elements in the FGD: MODERATOR/FACILITATOR and the RECORDER?DOCUMENTOR

• How to initiate the FGD process? What are the necessary facilitation techniques to encourage openness?
B. The FGD Process

- The FACILITATOR
  - Try to be sensitive
  - Know how to listen in “stereo” – pay attention to choice of words, the articulated and the “muted” channels (e.g. verbalize socially desirable/acceptable responses or in line with dominant culture)
  - Encourage maximum participation/interaction
  - Be Self-aware – be aware of own biases and prejudices that impinge on FGD process
  - Willing to self-disclose (principle of mutual disclosure) to establish trust and rapport
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- The RECORDER/DOCUMENTOR

- Faithful recording of not just what is said in the participants’ own words but also of the non-verbal communication patterns in the interaction
- Observing the process and noting the dynamics of interaction
- Should the recorder belong/come from the same community? Depending on the topic and degree of comfort of the participants in disclosing to strangers or to members of own community (e.g. birthing positions - recorder from community or more comfortable to have outsider-documentors for controversial topics like abortion or sexual behavior or battering)
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• The RECORDER/DOCUMENTOR

- Should have the same language, familiar with nuances of language and non-verbal cues/nuances

- Ideal to have more than one recorders (one for the substance of the discussion and another is observing the process, noting the dynamics and interaction and the non-verbal cues but at the same time minimizing misattribution)
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Process of Analyzing the Focus Group Result REITERATIVE

• Before conducting FG
  – Reflect on purpose of the study
  – Make preliminary decision on analysis strategy (using transcript-based, tape-based, note-based, memory-based analysis; manual or aided by computer software – either way, the researchers make the decision on big ideas or important themes (use color pens or symbols, use what works for you))
  – Brainstorm, revise, apply, revise – REITERATIVE process
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Process of Analyzing the Focus Group Results – REITERATIVE

• While still in the FG
  – Check recording devices
  – Take careful notes and important observations
  – Listen in “stereo mode” – various channels (including muted channels)
  – Employ summary of key questions

• Immediately after the FG
  – Label and file all field notes
  – Make notes regarding initial analysis (not just of what was said but also about the process while still in the environment and fresh in your memory)
  – Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing (assess)
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Handling Problem/Issues

• Overly dominant participants
• Participants monopolizing the discussion
• Difficult, smart-alecky, argumentative participants
• Shy participants
• Boredom, fatigue
• Accompanying children
• Presence of kibitzers
• Simultaneous talking among participants
• Conflicts between participants
• Participants turning the tables on you
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References and suggested readings

• Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds. Handbook of Qualitative Research.


Thank You!
Under ideal conditions, the participants should undergo the entire FGD process from formulation of the research problem, objectives, questions, selection and recruitment of participants, formulating the questions, conduct of the FGD (facilitation and documentation), reporting of documentation, data analysis, and writing the FGD report, etc.

For purposes of this exercise in familiarizing and appreciation of FGD, a “mock FGD” limited to facilitation and documentation will be conducted.
The objective of this “mock FGD” is to identify reasons for outmigration and their effects on the family and the community.
EXERCISE on FGD

1. Constitute the focus group of 10 participants (ask for volunteers).
2. The group should decide who will take the roles of
   (a) facilitator/moderator;
   (b) two (2) recorders/documentors.
3. Facilitator should run the FGD

Key questions:
- **What are the reasons why people from your village migrate to the cities or other countries?**
- **What are the effects on the family and the village of outmigration?**
- **What are your views regarding the outmigration in your village?**
- **How do you feel about it? (outmigration in your village)?**

4. Documentor will make a brief summary report.
1. Process of self-criticism how the FGD was run (facilitation and documentation).
2. The rest of the workshop participants will observe the FGD process and can make additional comments on the conduct of the FGD not covered in the self-criticism process of the FGD participants.
2nd FGD Exercise
Objective: To capture the perceptions on the practice of arranged marriages

Key questions:

• What are the forms of arranged marriages practiced in your community or in your ethnolinguistic group?
• What are the views of the elders regarding such practices of arranged marriages? What are the views of the youth (or the specific affected social group) regarding such practices of arranged marriages?
• What are your views regarding such practices of arranged marriages?