

For example, the initial site of the focus groups had to be changed. To arrive at the original site, female participants were dependent upon their male family members, who did not prioritize the study. Consequently, later iterations of the focus group were moved to places where women typically (and more easily congregated). A table and chairs were eschewed for sitting on the floor, a common practice in social settings. The researchers found that, while some subjects were addressed easily in the group settings, others, including certain psychological and sexual questions, were not. The researchers decided, consequently, to follow up the focus groups with individual interviews. Finally, the English equivalents for certain Arabic words were difficult to ascertain. The researchers asked for clarifications in meaning during the focus group conversation. They also later worked with an Emirati assistant to help with translation (Wilkins Winslow et al. 2002, 569–573).

In all, the researchers encountered several unexpected complications. Some were easy to address, such as re-modeling the physical space to ensure the comfort of participants. Some required in-time specification, as when the researchers sought to understand the meaning behind a word or phrase. Other complications, however, required significant adaptation, including the identification of a new focus group site that respected the women's restricted freedom of movement. Perhaps most significantly, the researchers decided to adopt a new data collection method – that of individual interviews – to respect perceived discomfort to discuss certain issues in the social setting. The implications of this study for our purposes are twofold. First, when carrying out focus groups in a non-native setting, researchers will need to be sensitive, informed, and also flexible to any complication that occurs. Second, focus groups that address sensitive topics carry their own set of considerations that we should consider now.

Focus Groups and Sensitive Subjects

While Wilkins Winslow et al. (2002) found that some topics were, perhaps, too difficult to address with groups of Emirati women in their project,⁴ other researchers (see, e.g., Farquhar and Das 1999; Kitzinger 1994, 112; Liamputtong 2011; Morgan 1996) assert that focus groups are actually particularly well suited for addressing research on sensitive topics. There are reasons for this, as discussed in Chapter 1. Focus groups serve as a setting of

⁴ In fact, the decision to use interviews to discuss more difficult or sensitive topics is not without its problems either. Madriz (1997) states that women were actually less likely to discuss sensitive subjects when they sat down individually with the interviewer. This was because the power dynamic between the researcher and her subject was much more evident in a one-on-one, rather than group, setting. More on this in the following section.

mutual support (Kroll et al. 2007, 697). They create “layers of communication” that “provide respondents with a safe environment” to express their ideas (Liamputtong 2011, 110). Overall, the group setting can ease the discomfort of discussing a difficult issue, especially after one person opens the discussion and breaks the proverbial ice on the matter (Barbour 2008, 18).

Of course, for the focus group to be successful in collecting data on a sensitive topic, participants must be willing to speak. Here, the work of the researcher and, again, the moderator is important. Sensitive topics – those that might be “intimate, discreditable or incriminating” in nature (Renzetti and Lee 1993, ix, as taken from Liamputtong 2011, 108) – require special care when considered in any data collection setting. This includes focus groups, as Wellings et al. (2000) duly note. The following are some of the things to keep in mind.

For one, question order matters. The researcher will want to consider how quickly and to what degree a particularly sensitive topic is broached. Wellings et al. (2000) recommend starting with more neutral questions – breaking the ice, as we called it above – before turning to more delicate or difficult subjects. How quickly the focus group turns to these subjects should be gauged by the moderator (Wellings et al. 2000, 257). On this point, careful attention to non-verbal cues of discomfort or reluctance is important.

Additionally, focus group composition can affect openness. Here, what a researcher loses in terms of participant homogeneity (that is, with respect to discord and disagreement) she likely gains in terms of enabling a comfortable space for participants to speak (Wellings et al. 2000, 258). Finally, it should be noted that hesitancy and difficulty in expression are informative for the researcher and can constitute data (Wellings et al. 2000, 259–260). That said, no participant should under any circumstances feel forced to speak against their wishes.

On all these points, the moderator and the researcher are important. The latter must work with her IRB or ethics committee to create a question protocol and plan of action that is thoughtful to the sensitive nature of the research at hand. The former must both manage the focus group neutrally, in the face of uncomfortable and even unpalatable interventions, while also setting the stage for the difficulty of the conversation that follows. For example, the moderator should use language that encourages group openness. One way to do this is for the moderator to share something about herself that reflects her own willingness to be vulnerable. (In fact, having a moderator that matches, to the extent possible, the demographic group of the focus group participants is ideal.) Finally, the moderator should exploit her interpersonal skills, and especially empathy, to monitor levels of discomfort and, where necessary, change the nature of the conversation underway (Wellings et al. 2000, 259–260).

It bears emphasizing, once more, that focus groups are often considered well suited for addressing difficult or sensitive topics. Madriz (1997) makes this point in her own work on the fear of crime in women's lives. She found that many women, and especially Latina women, were more comfortable discussing their own experiences with crime in a group setting, because it was less threatening than other data collection methods, including interviews. Specifically, one woman said to her, "When I am alone with an interviewer, I feel intimidated, scared" (Madriz 1997, 165). Additionally, the group setting allowed Madriz to include undocumented women, because they were not alone in their situation but instead in the company of others (Madriz 1997, 165).

Indeed, Kvale (2006) problematizes the idea that interviews, as a preferred alternative to focus groups for discussing sensitive topics, allow subjects to freely discuss their opinions. That interviews are democratic is a "fantasy"; instead, there is one person who primarily gains from the experience. Therefore, "claims of participation disguise the exertion of power" (Kvale 2006, 482). Interviews are inherently asymmetrical. They are "a one-way dialogue, an instrumental and indirect conversation, where the interviewer upholds a monopoly of interpretation" (Kvale 2006, 484). Focus groups relieve some (but not all [see below]) of these asymmetries by including multiple subjects. It is much more difficult for the researcher to exert control. The power imbalance between researcher and subject is counteracted by the sheer number of subjects involved. If they wish to take the conversation in a particular direction, there is little the researcher can do to stop them.

Overall, while researchers must take special care in organizing focus groups around more sensitive topics, the nature of the research should not dissuade them from using the method. Indeed, for many researchers, it is the social nature of the focus group that makes the method apt for systematically considering these topics. The group setting creates a space for shared experience among participants. Additionally, focus groups defuse, at least partially, the power dynamics between the researcher and her subject(s). That said, it is undoubtedly the case that power dynamics imbue the focus group method, as they do all data collection methods (Hunleth 2011, 82). Before concluding this chapter, therefore, let us briefly consider the power differentials that exist in the focus group setting and which should, consequently, be kept in mind.

The Researcher as "Other": Power Dynamics in the Focus Group Setting

Power exists in all social relationships. This is especially the case in the research setting, where the researcher seeks to benefit unilaterally from the solicitation of specific information from others. In some cases the power differential

between the researcher and the subjects is especially apparent. Take, for example, a situation in which a researcher from a developed country is studying topics that affect individuals in the developing world. Or when a white, male researcher wishes to study a topic related to female persons of color. In these situations, for historical, social, and/or contextual reasons, it is often difficult to establish a relationship of equality between the researcher and the research subjects.

Acknowledging this power imbalance is essential for the successful collection and analysis of any data obtained from human subjects. In the focus group setting, the quality of the data is in great part a function of the honesty and engagement of the participants. Focus group data are emic in nature and socially produced. If participants are influenced disproportionately by the researcher's perceived position of authority, rather than by the focus group conversation, then the integrity of the data will be compromised (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Krueger 1998a). Put simply, it is not a good thing when focus group participants tell a researcher what they think she wants to hear.

Notably, we lack consensus regarding the nature and impact of the power dynamic between the focus group researcher and her subjects. Some assert it is inherent to the data collection process and can dramatically affect the quality of data collected (Jakobsen 2012). Others, by contrast, say that the dynamic between the researcher and participants can have myriad expressions. A researcher may be "a chair, a safe third party . . . , a witness, an ally, a conduit to a wider audience, and a student in need of instruction" (Ayrton 2018, 13). Moreover, because power is an "inevitable facet of social life," focus group researchers should accept it and attempt to examine its effects (Ayrton 2018, 13). Regardless of one's position about the impact of power, I have yet to see a scholar claim that the researcher-subject(s) relationship is *not* imbued by a power differential.

How, then, can we deal with this power dynamic? There are multiple options. A first step is to create, to the extent possible, a focus group setting that broadly reflects the social experiences that participants live on a daily basis (Vissandjee et al. 2002). This will de-emphasize, if not fully eliminate, the artificial nature of the conversation. Second, the researcher should strive to use a moderator that is as similar to the participants as possible. This makes it more likely that the participants will see the person managing the conversation as an equal. Next, the moderator should be attentive to when/if the participants engage her as an equal. For example, to what extent do they include her in some social norm or a shared understanding (Ayrton 2018, 13)? How often does this occur? In other words, how much of a power differential is actually operating during the conversation?

Finally, the moderator should interject as little as possible, allowing the participants to take control of the conversation. Jakobsen (2012) calls this “decentering,” which involves shifting the participants’ attention away from the moderator, who she is, and how to relate to her, and toward the other participants and the discussion at hand (Jakobson 2012, 122). She also offers strategies on how to do this. For example, the moderator can ask participants to share their responses to a question with their neighbor prior to voicing it aloud to the entire group. This can complicate attempts to find the “right” answer, while also helping participants commit to a response before sharing it with others (Jakobsen 2012, 122). Alternatively, the moderator can, first, ask a question of the group and then leave the room so that the group discusses the answer without any outside influence (Jakobsen 2012, 124). The moderator would tape the conversation and ask the participants to summarize their discussion upon her return.

Overall, the power differential is a fact of life of the data collection process. As a researcher, your job is to acknowledge it exists, take the steps that you deem necessary to mitigate it, and make note of how it might nonetheless affect the conversation that unfolds.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the multiple steps that researchers typically take to prepare for undertaking focus groups. As indicated in Table 3.1, the researcher should ask herself a set of practical questions. The answer to each will help define focus group logistics, the process through which participants will be recruited, consented, and brought together, and the key actors, materials, and objectives of the focus groups themselves. Specific attention was paid to the role of the moderator, who is charged with facilitating the focus group conversation, and the question protocol, which orients the conversation that unfolds. We spent additional time, too, on the extra care that must be taken to prepare for focus groups in non-native settings and when addressing sensitive research topics. In general, we noted that the power imbalance that operates between the researcher and her research subjects should be acknowledged as preparations are made and conversations unfold.

It is now time to consider the focus group itself! At this point, the researcher should be ready to actually carry out the data collection method in the real world. The next chapter outlines some important considerations to bear in mind during the focus group itself. Remember, however, that, with focus groups, as with many (if not all!) data collection methods, much of the hard