

Evaluating the Efficacy of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Qualitative Social Research

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Abstract

The efficacy of Focus Group Discussion as a qualitative data collection methodology is put on the line by empirically comparing and contrasting data from two FGD sessions and one-on-one interviews to ascertain the consistency in terms of data retrieved from respondents using these two data collection methodologies. The study is guided by the hypothesis that data obtained by FGD may be influenced by groupthink rather than individual respondents' perspectives. A critical scrutiny of the data that emanated from the two organized focus groups discussion departed quite significantly from the data that was elicited from the one-on-one qualitative interviews. The difference in responses confirms that FGDs are not fully insulated from the shackles of groupthink. It is recommended, among others, that though FGD can stand unilaterally as a research methodology for non-sensitive topics with no direct personal implications for respondents; researchers should be encouraged to adopt FGD in league with other methodologies in a form of triangulation or mixed methodological approach for a more quality data, bearing in mind the central role occupied by data in the scientific research process.

Key Words: Focus Group Discussion, One-on-One Qualitative Interview, Social Research Methodology, Qualitative Data, and Groupthink.

1. Introduction

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD), which is also referred to as group interviewing, is essentially a qualitative research methodology. It is based on structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews. It offers qualitative researchers the opportunity to interview several respondents systematically and simultaneously (Babbie, 2011). FGD is applauded and widely used in recent times mainly because of its strength of convenience, economic advantage, high face validity, and speedy results (Krueger, 1988). Many authors also subscribe to the notion that FGD is advantageous because of its purposeful use of social interaction in generating data (Merton et al., 1990, Morgan, 1996). It is the use of social interaction which distinguishes it from other qualitative research methodologies (Merton et al., 1990).

The recent popularity being enjoyed by FGD is not necessarily because it is the best conduit of eliciting quality qualitative data, but because of its convenient and economic usage. These seem to have been the driving force for its recent popularity. Despite the popularity of FGD, it is fraught with some flaws including the less control it offers to researchers in the interview process (Krueger, 1994). Further, it is susceptible to the dangers groupthink may pose on individual participants responses, which can significantly impact on the outcome of studies. In this paper, the efficacy of FGD as a data collection methodology is put on the line by empirically comparing and contrasting data from FGD and one-on-one interviews to ascertain the consistency in terms of data retrieved from respondents. The study is guided by the hypothesis that data obtained by FGD may be influenced by groupthink rather than individual respondent's perspectives.

This paper is critical for a couple of reasons. First, the fact that qualitative social research approach has gained much momentum recently means that methodologies supporting this research design are constantly evaluated as a critical step in adding to their qualities. The second reason is to evaluate the quality of FGD in a way different from the conventional assessment format generally based on its constitution involving group formation, discussion settings, numerical strength of groups, general motivation, and quality of facilitation/moderation. Granted that no research methodology is perfect, efforts need to be made periodically in appraising the social methods in order to design feasible ways of improving upon them. This is critical because the value of social research, no doubt, dwells mainly on quality data. There is dearth of literature on the evaluation of social research methodologies, hence the need to contribute in filling this void through this study.

2. Potential Impact of Groupthink on the Outcome of Focus Group Discussion

Groupthink is a psychological observable fact that occurs within groups of people. It is the manner of thoughts that happens when the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overshadows a pragmatic appraisal of alternatives. Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative perspectives (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). Most of the initial research on groupthink was performed by Irving Janis. In an influential 1972 book, his original definition of the term was "A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action (Janis, 1972). Following Janis, other studies have attempted to reformulate the groupthink model. Notable among them include Hart (1998), who developed a concept of groupthink as premised upon collective optimism and collective avoidance. In looking at the correlation between social influence and decision-making, McCauley (1989) pointed to the tremendous impact of conformity and compliance in groups decisions.

The principal social cost of groupthink, however, is the loss of individual creativity, uniqueness, and independent thinking (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). Whether groupthink occurs in a situation is largely a subjective perception (Schafer and Crichlow, 1996). But it is undeniable the fact that groupthink has the potential to impact on reactions from individuals in group situations. Groups are, without a doubt, cogent social interaction capable of wielding significant influence - could be positive or negative - on decision-making. They can sometimes encourage individuals to conform to behaviours and actions that they would otherwise not engaged in. Famous classical experimentations by Stanley Milgram (1963, 1965) and Solomon Asch (1952) amply reveal the tremendous impact that a groupthink can have on individual behaviour and action when in a group situation.

3. Method of Study

In order to place FGD under the microscope, another social research methodology - social experimentation - was adopted. Two focus group discussions were organized on relationship between stress, domestic violence, and health. Two groups composed of six members each were constituted to dilate on the issue. Their responses were noted in the focus groups discussion. This was followed up with a one-on-one qualitative interview with the same respondents. The later interview was based on the same theme but couched a little bit differently in a form similar to the test-retest approach.

The rationale was to ascertain if the responses from the focus groups discussion departed significantly from that of the one-on one qualitative interview. This was done to check if groupthink had an influence on the responses that emanated from the two focus group discussions. The problem with this approach, however, was ensuring that the differences in the responses from the groups and the one-on-one interviews, if any, was attributable to groupthink. The limitation was how to control for potential sources of spuriousness between the variables groupthink and individual responses in focus groups discussion. A way of counteracting the spuriousness between the independent and dependent variables in the study's hypothesis was to ensure a brief period between the focus groups discussion and the one-on-one interview.

4. Analysis, Conclusion and Recommendations

A critical scrutiny of the data that emanated from the two organized focus groups discussion departed quite significantly from the data that was elicited from the one -on-one qualitative interviews. A number of inferences can be made out of the above revelation. Prominent inference, however, is the confirmation of FGD as not fully insulated from groupthink.

The case where groupthink offset individual responses may be attributed to many external variables as well, including the overall organization, constitution, composition, and even the participants motivation during the FGD session. Consequently, to control for any spuriousness in the correlation between the variables - groupthink and differences in results outcome - the respondents were made to recall their experiences in the FGD during the one-on-one qualitative interviews. It was unanimously expressed by the respondents that they never felt pressurized being part of the FGD. Majority of them, however, felt shy to delve deeper into their experiences because they did not know the other respondents and for that matter could not entrust them with details about their private lives. It is believed that the "hold back" attitude of the respondents primarily accounted for the disparity found in the two data sets. At best, sensitive social topics, like the one used for this study, with direct personal implications for respondents should not be premised on FGD.

Groupthink, thus comes into the equation because the fact that majority of the respondents could not open up with their experiences in relation to the subject/themes implied that they had to concur and conform with the experiences of the few who could open up to fit into the group's orientation. Evidently, FGD in spite of its widely acclaimed popularity as a social research methodology because of its convenience and economical usage, can be fraught with some limitations. These limitations are rooted in the potential adverse impact that groupthink may have on the outcome of FGD.

On the contrary, FGD can also provide the necessary enlightening and conceptual tool to educate respondents more on a non-sensitive subject to enable them relate well to it, and not necessary be swayed or influenced by groupthink. FGD can spark off one another, suggesting different dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one participant might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It is therefore no surprise the fact that researchers hold different opinions as to the amount of agreement needed within a group to conclude the occurrence of groupthink in social research outcome (Schafer and Crichlow, 1996).

That said, caution has to be exercised in ensuring that groupthink does not take away the individuality, uniqueness, and independent thinking expected of respondents. Such a caution is critical in lieu of the revelation in the literature that the primary socially negative cost of groupthink may be the loss of individual creativity, uniqueness, and independent thinking (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998).

Even though all research methodologies do have some rough edges to it, it is important the respective negativities rendering them not fully functional are identified and addressed so as to yield quality data, which invariably defines the outcome of scientific research. Identifying groupthink as a potential danger to the outcome of FGD is therefore a step in the right direction.

The following recommendations are worth considering in improving the efficacy of FGD as a social research methodology rooted in social interaction. Though FGD can stand unilaterally as a research methodology for a study, it is recommended that where researchers have the resources they should be encouraged to adopt FGD in league with other methodologies in a form of triangulation and mixed methodological approach. For example FGD, which generates more sociologically-based data can be buttressed by one-on-one qualitative interview to elicit for a more data on a subject/theme.

Facilitators or moderators should always remind themselves of the potential dangers that groupthink can pose on the outcome of FGD by ensuring fair distribution of opportunities to all participants to voice out their perspectives. FGD participants voluntary assumption of leadership roles and overly assertiveness should be professional discouraged. Individual participants in FGD should be discouraged as much as possible from socially distancing themselves from the others, in order not to influence or dictate indirectly the outcome of responses.

The constitution and composition of FGD as a homogeneous group, though difficult to be realistically attained always, should be strived for by FGD organizers to place all participants on the same pedestal. This will aid in counteracting unnecessary influence other participants may wield on their colleagues and groupthink for that matter. Another way of minimizing the potential impact of groupthink in FGD is to adopt the extended focus group technique. This entails a survey administration to participants prior to the FGD itself. The survey basically includes materials to be discussed at the FGD. Such surveys enable participants to develop a commitment to a stance or perspective prior to the FGD (Sussman et al., 1991), so they do not easily become swayed by the group.

The extended focus group can also come after the real FGD to minimize the impact the exposure to some of the discussed questions prior to the real FGD may pose on participants reaction in the group session. In the post FGD situation, an administration of a brief survey interview is offered to participants to capture their summary or overall views of on the subject/theme discussed. Such a follow-up survey interviews will also offer respondent another opportunity to express views they could not expressed in the earlier discussion, or clarify further on points or stance already expressed. This, surely, can impact positively on the quality of the data. The disadvantage here though is that some participants who have already been overly influenced by the group may still be stuck to the group's orientation.

Organizers of FGD as a tool for qualitative field research need to be mindful that not all social qualitative topics lend themselves for the application of the FGD. Studies on sensitive topics with personal implications for respondents should not be premised on FGD.

This is because respondents may struggle or become hesitant to share with a third party for fear of stigmatization, breaking of confidentiality, and trust. Social research topics to be studied should, therefore, be taken into serious cognizance in the selection of FGD as a qualitative research methodology.

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