

Researching Children's Experience

Exploring Children's Views through Focus Groups

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Background

A focus group is a discussion involving a small number of participants, led by a moderator, which seeks to gain an insight into the participants' experiences, attitudes and/or perceptions. The origins of the focus group are typically traced to Bogardus (1926), who advocated the use of group interviews because of their ability to stimulate people to present points that might be neglected in individual interviews and because they are cheaper and quicker to conduct than individual interviews. However, the group interviews described by Bogardus (1926) seem to have been primarily information gathering sessions and the large numbers of individuals present (at times as many as forty-five) would have made it impossible to explore complex or sensitive topics in any depth.

The origins of the principles that guide the running of most focus groups in sociological and psychological enquiry today owe much to the pioneering work of Merton and Kendall (1955). They described the uses of their 'focused interview' as a means of understanding and interpreting the results of quantitative research. Crucially they described the characteristics of the focused interview as: (a) involving a small number of individuals who have something in common; (b) gathering data on the subjective experiences of the participants; and (c) led by a moderator who guides discussion on the topics of interest. In contrast to the ways in which focus groups have been used in recent publications, Merton and Kendall (1955) saw the primary aim of the 'focused interview' as hypothesis testing. In its origins, therefore, the 'focused interview' was conceptualized as deriving from the natural science approach that was dominant in psychology at the time.

Much of the development of the focus group format in the 1970s and 1980s took place in applied settings, particularly market research. By the mid-1980s, however, social scientists, particularly within sociology and education, were taking an interest in the method which they believed had the potential to contribute to their discipline as a qualitative research method. This view of the value of the focus group seems to be shared by most recent authors on the topic (for example, Krueger, 1996; Morgan, 1996; Vaughn, Schumm, & [p. 237 ↓] Sinagub, 1996). The focus group, therefore, is currently characterized as a qualitative research method.

The last ten years have seen a considerable rise in the number of publications in which focus groups were used with children and teenagers. The largest number of studies are broadly within the field of health psychology and health education, however they have also been used in many other fields of research, for example, social work (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997), sociology (Wight, 1994), market research (McDonald & Topper, 1988), school counselling (McMahon & Patton, 1997), education (Lewis, 1992), child psychiatry (MacMullin & Odeh, 1999), children with special needs (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995; Rinne, 1997), and anthropology (Agar & MacDonald, 1995). Within these disciplines focus groups have been used to different ends and at different stages of the research process, for example, in order to explore children's ideas and values, develop and adapt questionnaires for children, and develop educational programmes.

Although focus groups have been used most often to gather information on children's views or perspectives, they are also useful when children's experiences are of interest to researchers. For example, Garley, Gallop, Johnston and Pipitone (1997) used focus groups to gather information about the experiences of children and adolescents living with a parent who was mentally ill. Kisker (1985) collected information on adolescents' sexual experiences and Hunter and Chandler (1999) used focus groups with high-risk young people to discuss essays which group members had written about their lives. The findings of all three studies suggest that focus groups were an effective way of gathering this data despite the sensitive nature of the topics.

Advantages and Disadvantages of using Focus Groups with Children

Focus groups have long been viewed as having advantages over interviews for gathering certain types of qualitative data. For example, Vaughn et al. (1996) claim that the support offered to individuals within a focus group allows the participants greater openness in their responses. Lewis (1992) points out that, unlike an interview, a focus group does not have to be terminated when an individual does not respond. Further advantages outlined by Basch (1987) can be summarized as follows: reduced pressure on individuals to respond to every question; flexibility to be used alone or in combination with other research methods; reduced cost over interviews with the same number of individuals.

In addition to these advantages, there are reasons that make focus groups particularly suitable for use with children. Thus, Mauthner (1997) argues that focus groups create a safe peer environment and replicate the type of small group settings that children are familiar with from their classroom work. The peer support provided in the small group setting may also help to redress the power imbalance between adult and child that exists in one-to-one interviews. Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) argue that children may be encouraged to [p. 238 ↓] give their opinions when they hear others do so and their memory may be jogged by the contributions of other participants. This effect has also been noted by the present authors in their study of children's perceptions of the causes of psychological problems. In the excerpt from the study that follows, a group of six 14-year-old boys is discussing the possible causes of the behaviour of a fictional boy (Frank), which has just been described in a short vignette. The group discussion is moderated by the first author (E.H.)

It's probably a social insecurity problem eh ... once again one that you would have had since birth and I tend to agree with Jim in saying that his upbringing would not have helped. I mean there are parents and parents. And Frank [the fictional child in the vignette] has probably got the type of parents who pay him absolutely no attention, he's maybe ... maybe they're quite often out at work so Frank seeks attention and channels that into his dreadful behaviour.

Yeah, I think attention seeking is ...

Too much attention.

And do you think it would be because of a lack of attention at home or do you think it's more likely to arise from something that's going on in school?

It could be at home because that's the first place you look, that's the first place you're taught, you know and then maybe at school he looks for attention at school because he doesn't get it at home.

Maybe he gets too much attention at home and he lashes out because he's sick of everyone always talking to him and wondering how he is and stuff.

Maybe he gets lots of attention at home and he expects the same kind of attention at school.

Although all the comments in this excerpt refer to attention seeking as a possible cause of the behaviour, each boy's view differs slightly. In this way the group context has provided a much richer account of the nature of attention seeking than would have been possible from a series of interviews.

Finally, Levine and Zimmerman (1996) suggest that an important advantage of using focus groups with children is that the method acknowledges the participants as experts. Thus, a child participating in a focus group should not feel that he or she is being questioned by an adult but rather that he or she is sharing experiences with a group of peers. In contrast to an individual interview, the adult's role should be one of facilitating and encouraging the discussion rather than formally leading it. Indeed, the method might well be suited to facilitating a greater involvement by children in the research process, with children leading focus groups on topics they have chosen. The authors are not, however, aware of any such work at present.

Of course, focus groups are not appropriate for all uses and Basch (1987) argues that one of the major limitations of focus groups is that they are not useful for testing hypotheses in a traditional experimental design. This view contrasts with the view of early researchers (for example, Merton & Kendall, 1955) but is consistent with

current theory and practice guiding the uses of focus groups. Basch (1987) also argues that focus groups are not appropriate [p. 239 ↓] for drawing inferences about larger populations or for statistical testing, which requires quantitative findings.

Interpersonal interaction is generally seen as an advantage of focus groups, however, it is important to consider the role of group processes in determining the nature of that interaction and to recognize that such interactions are not necessarily positive. For example, there is always the possibility that intimidation within the group may inhibit some individuals from making a contribution (Lewis, 1992). There is also a possibility that an individual's expressed opinion may be influenced by a desire to fit in with other group members. Thus, Wight (1994) reported that 16-year-old boys taking part in focus groups tended to exaggerate their use of sexist obscenities in line with the norms of masculinity that were dominant in the group.

Although not systematically researched in relation to focus groups, individual characteristics of the participating children and their relationships with one another will be powerful determinants of the group dynamic. Thus the personal qualities of the participating children, such as their levels of shyness or confidence, their age and whether or not they know the other participants, are all likely to influence the discussion. Based on their research with primary school children Hill et al. (1996) suggest that individual interviews may be better for encouraging diffident children who might have concerns about speaking in a group. However, Mayall (2000) suggests that having a friend present can be supportive and enabling and may assist children who would feel very shy if they were alone.

Focus groups can be run successfully with children as young as 8 years but it may be best to use playful group activities rather than conversation with younger age groups to facilitate their participation (Clark, 1996; Hill et al., 1996). Older children and adolescents are unlikely to have difficulties with the conversational demands of the group and therefore the method is typically most appropriate for this age group.

Although focus groups are generally perceived as more economical (with time and money) than a series of individual interviews (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997), there may be difficulties about getting all the participants together in the same place at the same time that do not arise for researchers who are using individual interviews. Thus, the

authors had to abandon the use of focus groups in favour of individual interviews in a children's hospital because of difficulties involved in organizing groups of children due to hospital schedules and restrictions based on children's illnesses.

Ethics in Focus Group Research

Involving children in focus group discussions gives rise to ethical issues that are not confronted by researchers using other research methods (Hill, 1998). These issues arise from two aspects of the focus group: (a) the fact that disclosures by participants are shared with all group members and not just the researcher; and (b) intense group discussion may give rise to stress or distress in individual participants. Both of these issues should be considered [p. 240 ↓] by the moderator when planning the groups and it is his or her responsibility (in addition to the usual requirements of establishing consent/assent for participation) to take all necessary steps to safeguard the participants in the groups. Although there are few guidelines available for running focus groups with children, suggestions from work with adult participants serve as a useful starting point. In relation to the first of these issues, Smith (1995) suggests that all participants be requested not to disclose group discussion to non-participants and also suggests that the researcher should alert participants to the possibility that such disclosure may occur. Hill (1998) advises that the moderator tell children that it is alright to say something very general about the topics discussed but not to give details and not to identify what any individual has said. This type of information from the moderator can form part of the introduction and could also include information on what will be done with the researcher's notes and tape recordings of proceedings.

The possibility that group discussion can give rise to strong emotional reactions is another important issue for consideration when running focus groups. In a group situation, it will not be possible for the moderator to guarantee that participants will not be upset or offended by one another's comments. Smith (1995) offers a number of suggestions for running focus groups on sensitive topics. These include the need for the moderator to monitor stress levels of participants and to be prepared to intervene when necessary, the importance of having small groups, and the value of debriefing sessions in which participants can discuss their reactions to the discussion. He also emphasizes the importance of having a co-leader with clinical experience present whenever the

focus group is dealing with a sensitive topic in order to adequately monitor the 'comfort level' of the participants. While Smith's (1995) suggestions relate to running focus groups with adult participants, they are equally applicable to research with children.

While these ethical concerns are relevant to all research in which focus groups are used, they are particularly pertinent when the topics being discussed are sensitive in nature. Thus, researchers organizing focus groups to discuss topics such as parental separation/divorce or sexual behaviour would need to pay particular attention to these issues. Because of the risks of disclosure of personal information outside the group setting, special attention should be given to the composition of such groups. For example, it may be possible to ensure that children do not know one another and are unlikely to meet again because they do not live near one another. Such precautions would minimize the risk of disclosure within a group becoming widely known in the child's neighbourhood or among their immediate peer groups.

Running a Focus Group

Group composition factors

A number of factors need to be considered when planning the composition of focus groups with children. These include group size, age, gender and other [p. 241 ↓] variables relevant to the topic of discussion. In relation to group size, the typical recommendation is that it should contain no fewer than five children and no more than eight (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Greenbaum, 1988; Vaughn et al., 1996). The danger with groups smaller than this is that they may become parallel interviews, while larger groups may make it more difficult for the moderator to maintain the focus of the discussion.

With regard to other aspects of group composition, the general rule appears to be 'homogeneity is best'; however, most recommendations are based on the experiences of authors as opposed to the systematic investigation of factors that impede or facilitate productive group discussions. In order to control for developmental differences, many authors recommend that the participants in a single group should be within a two-year

age span (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Greenbaum, 1988; Spethmann, 1992). Large age discrepancies are likely to create an imbalance within the group in terms of needs and abilities and, as a result, may upset the group dynamic. In addition, some authors only recommend the use of focus groups with children over six years, as the expressive language and social interaction skills of younger children may not be sophisticated enough to engage in the group process (Clark, 1996; Greenbaum, 1988; Vaughn et al., 1996). Evidence relating to the value of using focus groups with younger children is limited and contradictory (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Klein et al., 1992; Turner, Mayall, & Mauthner, 1995).

Many authors recommend that, with children and teenagers, single-sex focus groups work best (Mauthner, 1997; Spethmann, 1992; Vaughn et al., 1996). Greenbaum (1988) argues that younger children often dislike members of the opposite sex while teenagers may show high levels of interest in the opposite sex and this may detract from the flow of discussion. During early and middle childhood, there is substantial research evidence that children are most likely to play in single-sex groups (Maccoby, 1998) and this might provide one reason to consider single-sex groups when working with children this age. However, when children know one another well, as in Hill et al.'s (1996) research, mixed groups may work equally well. The researcher should certainly consider single-sex groups if the topic of the research is sensitive or if participants are likely to feel uncomfortable talking about their experiences because members of the opposite sex are present.

Planning a focus group also requires some consideration of the maximum length of the discussion. Vaughn et al. (1996) recommend that focus groups for children under 10 years should be less than forty-five minutes long and for children between 10 and 14 years they recommend a limit of one hour. These times should serve as guidance only. The moderator should be prepared to terminate discussion early if children appear bored or tired and may prolong the session if children appear engaged and eager to contribute.

A final consideration when planning the composition of a focus group is whether to include children who know one another (such as groups of friends or classmates) or children who are unfamiliar with one another. The section on ethics above has already indicated some circumstances when groups of 'strangers' may be most appropriate.

The final decision on composition [p. 242 ↓] should be based on consideration of factors such as the topic to be discussed and the age group of the children. Whatever composition is chosen, the researcher should remember that when children are meeting for the first time, they may wish to get to know the other participants before they are prepared to contribute. Because of this, a group composed of 'strangers' may take longer for discussion and the exchange of views to get started. In contrast, children from the same class in school know one another well and their interactions with each other will be a function of their relationship in the classroom and playground.

The role of the moderator

The success of the focus group discussion and the quality of the data obtained will be strongly influenced by the skills of the moderator and his or her ability to stimulate and maintain discussion among the participants. The moderator has three major functions, the first of which is to make the group feel comfortable and at ease. In order to do this the moderator should try to communicate with the group participants using language they understand and should acknowledge the value of each child's contributions. Including activities that will engage children's attention can also be an important part of ensuring that the participants feel comfortable within the group.

In addition, the moderator should set him or herself apart from other authority figures and emphasize that his or her role is not to judge or discipline the children, but to listen to stories about their experiences and to understand their feelings. There are many ways in which the moderator can try to do this but some suggestions include using his or her first name and ensuring that he or she has the same seating arrangements as the children. Children may also feel more comfortable when discussing some topics if they can readily identify with the moderator, for example, because of his or her race, accent or gender. Whenever possible, consideration should be given to matching the moderator and the group, particularly if the moderator's race, accent or gender is likely to be relevant to the group discussion. For example, a group of children from a minority ethnic group might feel more comfortable talking about their experiences of racial identity or harassment if the moderator of the group is from the same ethnic group. A group of teenagers might feel more comfortable discussing their life experiences if the

moderator appears close to them in age rather than close to the age of their parents or teachers.

The second function of the moderator is to keep the group discussion focused on the topic of interest and to ensure that all children have the opportunity to contribute. This does not mean that the moderator must work rigidly through the interview with a series of carefully prepared questions. With young children, the moderator must welcome contributions on topics that are important to the participants, including their jokes and their stories about recent events, even if these do not appear to be closely linked to the research question. The following section of transcript from the [p. 243 ↓] authors' work illustrates the way in which younger children (in this case 8-year-old girls) will bring their own stories to the group discussion. The short section immediately follows the moderator's reading of a vignette to the girls, who are clearly reminded of the behaviour of other members of their class. After a few comments, however, one of the participants suggests that they return to the original discussion and the participants are happy to accept the suggestion:

He's always like that, Roger [a boy in their class] he's always like that, scratching himself.

When we're playing the tin whistle Roger has to play it sometimes at a different time and he's always going like that [scratching].

He's always scratching. He doesn't like playing the tin whistle.

Oh yeah.

I love it but I hate when it gets to high D.

Will we get back to the stories now?

Yeah will we?

Yeah.

Clark (1996) argues that when children are having fun it will be easier to keep them focused on the interview topic. Telling jokes and stories can help to keep a sense of fun in the group. Allowing the children's ideas to dominate for at least part of the discussion also conveys to the group that the adult is not controlling all the topics of discussion.

At all times the moderator needs to monitor the contributions of children and to ensure that shy or reticent children are encouraged to contribute and the more vocal participants are not allowed to dominate the discussion. To achieve this balance when the group discussion is very lively, it may be necessary to ask the children to help to ensure that each member of the group gets a chance to make a contribution without interruption. For example, all children could be given a coloured card before the discussion starts which they can display when they wish to contribute. Then the moderator, or one of the children, can call each person displaying a card in turn. This system ensures that everyone who wishes to speak gets a chance.

Finally, the moderator must try to enhance the clarity of the children's contributions by seeking clarification when responses seem ambiguous or when there are contributions from the same child that appear contradictory. The purpose of seeking such clarification is to ensure that the moderator has an accurate account of the child's views. For example, in the section of transcript that follows, the group is discussing why a child might display challenging behaviour in a classroom. Sam (11-years-old) makes a suggestion and the moderator (E.H.) seeks clarification of the phrase to ensure she understands what it means to him:

Okay, any other ideas?

Not being brought up well.

Okay, Sam. What would that mean, not to be brought up well?

If your parents don't really care about you, just let you do whatever you do.

[p. 244 ↓]

Sam's response to the request for clarification provided the researchers with much more useful and detailed information than his original contribution.

When asking a child to explain potentially contradictory contributions, it is important to acknowledge that what appears contradictory to an adult may not be so to a child and the moderator should not seek consistency. However, seeking clarification can help to ensure the accuracy of the adult's perceptions of the child's knowledge and experiences. Whenever possible, it is best to phrase the question using the same words as the child and to reflect them back as a means of stimulating further conversation. At other times the moderator may need to attend to a child's nonverbal behaviour or tone of voice to interpret exactly what is meant.

While each individual contribution is important, the moderator may also need to find out whether there is consensus or divergence among the group on an issue. In these circumstances, it may be useful to ask the children if they have any different ideas or if their ideas are the same as those already expressed. Sometimes it can appear that there is consensus in the group when there is not. This is illustrated in the following section of transcript taken from the authors' study mentioned earlier. In this section of the transcript the moderator (E.H.) checks to see if everyone agrees, even though the initial reaction of the 8-year-old boys suggested complete agreement among group members. At this point, Mark indicates his disagreement with the group and he is soon joined by Jack.

Who thinks he could just decide to stop [reference to inappropriate behaviour]?

[Many members of the group put their hands up.]

So you all think he could just decide to stop?

No, not all of us.

Mark, you don't think he could just decide to stop?

Not if he kept on watching fighting games programme on tele[vision].

So if he kept watching them he wouldn't be able to stop?

Yeah.

Or he could watch wrestling and try to do it on his friends.

Finally, it is useful if the moderator uses the children's names when addressing them or when acknowledging their contribution in order to facilitate accurate transcription. Otherwise, the process of identifying each individual's contribution during transcription can prove very difficult.

Recording the group discussion

There are two alternatives to recording the group discussion: audiotaping and videotaping. The most common method of recording is with audiotapes. Although videotapes capture the nonverbal behaviours of the participants, the presence of a camera may be intrusive and may affect spontaneity (Krueger, 1994). When an audiotape is used, an assistant moderator should be present at the discussion to take notes on the emerging themes and overall group dynamic. This may include taking notes on the nonverbal [p. 245 ↓] behaviours of the individuals, the emotional climate, the enthusiasm of the participants and the reactions of the individuals to the issues discussed and the questions asked. This information can provide important details that will enhance understanding of the discussion when it is transcribed. It also allows one to record details of the actual process of communication. For example, hesitance among individuals, consensus within the group (for example, when individuals nod in agreement) and details regarding patterns of interaction among the participants. Most qualitative data analysis packages allow these notes to be inserted alongside the appropriate place in the text to assist with the interpretation of statements.

Arranging the location/seating

Children are likely to feel most comfortable when they are in a familiar environment and whenever possible, children's familiarity with the location and ease of access should be considered when the groups are being planned. Schools are often the first locations considered by researchers and resource rooms, halls or empty classrooms can be suitably arranged for focus groups. However, there are circumstances when a school might not be an appropriate location. For example, if the researcher wished to

understand children's experiences of truanting and their reasons for not going to school then the school environment would not be conducive to a free discussion.

Consideration should also be given to the seating arrangements prior to the actual discussion. For younger children, sitting on the floor can contribute to a relaxed and informal atmosphere. If the children are to be seated, appropriately sized chairs should ideally be arranged around a circular table. The table can serve as a support or prop and may make children or adolescents feel less self-conscious. Whatever the seating arrangements, it is important that all participants should be able to establish eye contact with one another and the moderator. Krueger (1994) suggests that, ideally, the more dominant participants should be seated at the side of the moderator and those individuals who are shy should be placed directly across from the moderator so as to facilitate maximum eye-contact. With children, however, it may be more important to encourage them to choose their own seating arrangements so that they can sit close to a friend with whom they feel comfortable. Allowing children the freedom to choose their own seating arrangement can also help to distinguish between the adult-child relationship of the classroom and the focus group.

Introducing the group

Given the unfamiliarity of children with focus groups, it is essential to state clearly at the outset the purpose of the group discussion and provide children with an opportunity to ask questions. The amount of detail provided will depend on the ages and abilities of the children participating. If the interviews are to be audiotaped or videotaped, it is important to [p. 246 ↓] explain to children why this is necessary and to obtain their permission in order to do so. The format and nature of the group discussion should then be explained. This should involve explaining that (a) there are no right or wrong answers to the questions asked, that this is not a test, and that the aim of the discussion is to understand children's ideas on a specific topic; (b) children's answers will be confidential except in exceptional circumstances (for example, disclosure of abuse); (c) children should not discuss what others have said once they leave the room; and (d) only one individual should speak at a time and each individual's comments should be respected.

Using 'ice-breakers'

In the opening ten or fifteen minutes of the focus groups it is important to put the children at ease and set the stage for later involvement. A variety of ice-breakers may be used during this warm-up session. This may involve something simple such as allowing the children to listen to themselves speaking on the tape (an activity that the second author found very useful with children between the ages of 7 and 9 years). Younger children often enjoy making and wearing their own name badges and this will also help the moderator to remember the participants' names. Each participant, including the moderator, could then share some information about him or herself (for example, age, interests and so on). Activities like these help to make all participants feel relaxed and gives everyone a chance to practice saying something to the group.

Before introducing the topic of interest to the researcher it is a good idea to have the children engage in further 'ice-breaking' activities. The choice of activity should depend on the way in which the group discussion has been organized. If the core tasks of the focus group will involve physical activities (for example, sorting objects or role play games) then it can be useful to begin with games that involve moving around the room. However, if the core tasks are based around discussion or visual images then this should be reflected in the 'ice-breaking' activities. For example, Charlesworth and Rodwell (1997) used a paper and pencil pie chart and asked the children general questions in order to initiate a free flow of communication. Examples of these questions included: 'Who is your favourite singer?' 'What is your favourite TV show?' Ensuring some continuity between 'icebreakers' and the main discussion/activity avoids potential difficulty with transition from one type of activity to another.

Structuring the questions

The focus group should begin with more general questions and proceed in a sequential manner to the more specific topics. The initial opening questions are intended to foster conversation and interaction (Krueger, 1994) and to allow the participants to reflect on the topic of concern. Krueger (1994) recommends avoiding questions that imply

'yes' or 'no' [p. 247 ↓] answers and 'why' questions, as they may make individuals feel defensive or put pressure on them to rationalize their attitudes or behaviours. A less directive approach is to ask people 'what' or 'how' they feel about the object of discussion. The final questions that the moderator asks also have a critical role to play. The moderator or the assistant moderator may choose to summarize the main issues that arose during the interview and then check with the participants if this is an accurate summary or if anything important was missing. It may also be valuable to use this time to ask the participants to rank order the issues that they consider most important.

Using activities and supplementary materials

Given the importance of maintaining children's concentration and interest throughout the discussion, flexibility and creativity are essential when running focus groups. A variety of exercises and activities have been used by researchers to stimulate discussion. One of the most creative approaches adopted to date is evident in the work of Hill et al. (1996). These authors used a variety of developmentally appropriate techniques to explore children's emotional experiences and wellbeing. These included brainstorming, visual prompts, role play, self completion instruments and artwork. Other research protocols have included the use of colour slides that were relevant to the topics of discussion (Doswell & Vandestienne, 1996; Houghton, Durkin, & Carroll, 1995). Sentence-completion techniques have also proved an effective means for maintaining attention on the discussion topic. Each individual has to complete the task and subsequently discuss their ideas with the group. This exercise can be used to stimulate deeper discussion while also functioning as a means of involving all participants in the overall process (Greenbaum, 1988).

Analysing Focus Group Data

There are many different ways to analyse focus group data (for example, see Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992; Clark, Marsh, Davis, Igoe, & Stember, 1996; Krueger, 1994; Vaughn et al., 1996) and the final method chosen will reflect the nature and purposes

of the study. Systematic and thorough data analysis for academic research relies on full transcripts of the discussion with additional notes about the emotional tone of the group from the assistant moderator. The steps that follow are based on suggestions from a number of expert sources and on our own experiences of analysing data from focus groups run with children and adolescents.

Ensuring Quality in Focus Group Data and Analysis

The task of ensuring that good quality data are collected and that analysis is rigorous and systematic is common to researchers using quantitative and qualitative methods. Whereas the methods of establishing reliability and validity of quantitative data have received widespread attention and are widely documented, much less has been written about the issues in [p. 249 ↓] qualitative research. Recently, however, the issue has been addressed in a number of publications (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Krueger, 1993; Merrick, 1999). In this section we do not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of all possible approaches to the question of the quality of focus group research data, but rather to provide some illustrations of approaches adopted by researchers who have used focus groups with children.

Stanton et al. (1993) used a form of triangulation by comparing data obtained in focus groups with data obtained from individuals in a pile-sorting technique. Pile-sorting requires individuals to organize cards with phrases or pictures into clusters or categories based on a perceived shared dimension. The authors found that the pile-sorts revealed support for most of the views expressed in the group discussions. However, the sorts also found some interpretations that were not revealed in focus group discussions.

The issue of credibility (similar to aspects of reliability) is addressed by Kidd, Townley, Cole, McKnight and Piercy (1997), who explored the role of children in potentially dangerous farm chores. In their study, credibility was established by comparing information from focus groups about children's involvement in farm work with data on paediatric injuries on farms in the area. Another form of credibility checking employed

by the authors involved presenting each focus group with some themes that had emerged from previous groups for clarification.

Checks of coding consistency or inter-rater reliability are among the more common methods used by researchers to establish credibility. Thus, Kidd et al. (1997) randomly selected 10 per cent of the data bits per transcript and compared coding using a kappa coefficient. Morningstar et al. (1995) used a consensus method with two researchers who compared their identification and classification of relevant data units. Where they disagreed they discussed their perspectives until they reached a consensus.

There are also a number of possible approaches to establishing internal credibility (see Elliott et al., 1999). For example Clark et al. (1996) verified the researchers' interpretation of the focus group discussion on perceptions of health risk by comparing the issues which emerged from a matrix analysis of the transcripts with the total amount of time the teenagers had spent talking about each of the risk factors.

Reporting on Focus Groups

Because the goal of the focus group is to establish the perspectives of the participants it is very important that the researchers give enough detail about the participants and the context in which their views were given. Thus it is important to provide details such as the age range of participants in each group, whether the groups were mixed- or single-sex, whether the children were friends, acquaintances or strangers, the size of each group and the setting of the discussion (for example, school, youth club and so on). In addition, it may also be important to explain the defining criteria for [p. 250 ↓] admission to the group discussion and the length of the discussion which took place. Providing this information allows the reader to place the children's views in an appropriate context, so it is unfortunate that it has been omitted from so many publications (Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

Conclusions

Focus groups are a versatile method of gathering qualitative data with children from as young as 8-years-old through to adolescence. A skilful moderator should be able to use the dynamic of the group discussion to help children to give open and honest answers in a supportive environment. Indeed, the presence of a supportive peer group may make the focus group more appropriate than the individual interview for use with children, in some circumstances. As the method becomes more widely accepted in research with children, it is likely to receive greater attention from researchers and to be used in an even greater variety of research projects.

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Recommended Reading

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