

Focal Groups

BARBOUR, Rosaline.
Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2009.

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The work Focal Groups makes part of the Qualitative Inquiry Collection coordinated by Uwe Flick. It is composed by six books, like a necessary resource to the researchers whom want to plan, drive and execute the qualitative inquiry. The focal groups are an important approach in this aspect of inquiry, especially in the investigations of market and health.

The book aims to present suggestions on how to obtain sampling from a qualitative inquiry with focal groups, its meanings and ethical implications. His introduction is done by the coordinator who does the following investigations: what is and for what is the qualitative inquiry done? He identifies some characteristics in this type of investigation, like: the analysis of experiences with individuals or groups, the examination of interactions and communications in development and the investigation of documents to present the point in common of these approaches. It still offers a list of common attributes in the form of how the qualitative inquiry is done, besides spread the relative subjects to the other books that compose the collection.

After the introduction, Barbour establishes the definition of focal group like being, summarized, a “group interview” and does a delineation of the work presenting his chapters in groupings by subject. The first three put the inquiry into context with focal groups. The intermediary part approaches the projection and the establishment of a study with focal groups. From the seventh chapter ethical questions are raised, types of data provided by the focal groups, data analysis, reflexive challenges of the analysis and, finally, limitations and means.

Then, the author makes a list of the historical records of the focal groups thinking about his use of the emission of messages, marketing and public relations. He mentions

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the popularity of the method of inquiry of the organizational development and analyzes relative questions to the search of participative methods in the communitarian development. The author also makes reference to the studies with health services and social sciences, tackling the use of focal groups in different academic disciplines.

The understanding of when we should or should not use the focal groups, the knowledge of the particular reasons to use them and the understanding of the evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of this method of study constitute the objectives of the uses and misuses of the focal groups. Therefore, the uses employed in the exploratory phase of the study with mixed methods are critically examined. There are also varied examples of focal groups that are used in the preliminary phase of studies for the development of items that will have to be in questionnaires and the use of the adaptation of questionnaires for other populations.

The focal groups have been used in the investigation with ethnic minorities, in the projection of methodologies in culturally delicate questionnaires and in the formulation of questions of relevant contexts. Not to mention the evaluation of instruments of statistical inquiry, though such an exercise is not recommended to the least courageous researchers. Nevertheless, the unsuitable and aggressive use of the method may threaten perceptibly the constituent objectives of the groups.

The focal groups are not a first choice for individual studies. The case studies¹ seem more appropriate, as the nature of the discussions will tend to develop sequentially, like in an individual interview. Also they are not appropriated to evaluate attitudes, much less to carry out statistical generalizations from collected data. On the other hand, the focal group will be able to be used in situations in which the subjects of the inquiry consider face to face interactions embarrassing².

This way, the use of this method will be able to: result in to not so relevant and productive projects of inquiry, especially when the evaluation of costs and opportunities of the use of the focal groups are badly applied; promote the access to answers during

¹ STAKE, Robert E. The art of the investigation with case studies. Coimbra: Gulhenkian Foundation, 2007.

² In this point of the book, particularly, we do not appreciate the term "reluctant" individuals, employed by the author, not even when they appear in inverted commas, as it can pass the impression that the individual does not want to collaborate with the inquiry, besides the label applied to this standard of behavior.

the ramification of events; and to approach questions such as “why not ...”, specially to investigate the rejection or no adherence in the services of health. Whatever the circumstance it is advisable to appropriate the cultural projects of questionnaires and methodologies to the situation.

Barbour approaches the epistemological basis of the different uses of the focal groups, looking for the principal philosophical traditions and methodologies for this method of inquiry. She informs us that the focal groups have characteristics in common with other qualitative methods, in spite of presenting some challenges³ to be faced, like the mistake of attempting to measure individual attitudes from discussions of a focal group.

Another challenge originating from the positivistic approach is the preoccupation with the participant in telling the truth. Barbour also talks about the value collected by the use of focal groups that “provide an opportunity for producing data that are good candidates for the analysis by the approach of the symbolic interaction, which emphasizes the active construction of its meaning” (p. 62). This conducts us to affirm that the focal groups are suitable for the general paradigm of the qualitative inquiry.

In project of inquiry, Barbour outlines the alternatives of organization of the projection of inquiry. One of his objectives is to understand the logic of the use of focal groups or of individual interviews. The author alerts the fact of not existing rules already and the decision of choose will depend on the type of project to be presented. The combination of quite succeeded individual interviews and discussions of focal groups is called the mixed method approaches. The author quotes several studies where this type of approach is applied. The realization of the triangulation, frequently, is used in mixed method project, so that the data is compared in the sense of confirming or contradicting the results.

Barbour points out: the environments of inquiry, pointing to the necessity of flexibility of the researchers regarding the space; the combination of the moderator with the group, indicating the impact caused by the personality of the researcher in the form and content of the data enticed in the focal groups; and the recruitment, reflecting the ethical and pragmatic decisions of this process.

³ This part of the book seems like a more profound extension of the previous chapter, in which approaches the uses of the focal groups in a more profound form.

The sampling strategies provide the key for the possible comparisons of his data base. This part of the book supplies directions about the composition of the group and the use of preexistent groups. Also it evaluates ethical questions to develop sampling strategies and group convocation.

In the intentional or theoretical sampling instead of obtaining representativeness, the objective is to reflect the diversity. As for the size and number of the groups, it is determined by the comparisons the researcher wants to carry out, since a standard or rule does not exist for such. In the sample charts and the potential for the comparison, a chart that shows the development of a sampling strategy is presented. In the paper of serendipity⁴, a word of comfort “can be diverted of the observation of which it is equally unlikely to do everything completely wrong” (p. 92). In spite of the financing and short deadlines for the projects, the researchers, when possible, must return to the field to test the emergent hypotheses. Finally, it is advisable that there is, mainly, the recruitment of strange groups instead of preexistent groups.

As for the practical questions of projection and execution of the focal groups, directions are provided on decisions and skills implicated in the sessions, in the discussion records, in the annotations and in the transcriptions. The author begins with the establishment of the setting in which he emphasizes the criteria of privacy and confidentiality. He emphasizes the importance of use of good quality recording equipment in order to built a transcription able to capture the insights referring to the moderators, to the individual participants and to the dynamics of the group.

In reference to the skills of the moderators, Barbour believes that the researchers need to continuously examine his presuppositions about the degree of power that they exert on the elements of the group, remembering that the primordial task is the facilitation and do not the control. Before finishing this part, she establishes a reflection around the development and the use of topic guides, of the types of materials of stimulus for focal groups and of the use of focal groups to develop the stimulus materials themselves.

⁴ Neologism that refers to the fortunate actions discovered, apparently, by chance. Consulted in: Ferreira, Aurélio Buarque of Holland. New electronic dictionary Aurélio version 5.0. Positive Computer science, 2004.

The ethics and the commitment are the elements of the book that recapitulate and expand the ethical questions during the process of creation, driving and closing of the focal group. In other words, they are examined “the reasons why people agree to participate in our inquiry and the responsibilities of the team of inquiry in terms of reciprocity” (p. 123). When Barbour refers to the impact of the participation on the focal group, she affirms that one of the reasons for the acceptance of the participants can be the cathartic element⁵, in spite of not knowing his motives⁶ for certain.

The author points to the relevance of making concluding explanations with the participants before the end of a session with the focal group, emphasizing the necessity of the researcher in having access to a supervision⁷ that discusses the thoughts and feelings of the researcher after the exhibition to the work of field. She also makes special considerations and challenges to be faced by the researchers, mainly with vulnerable groups and transcultural researches.

The objective of the production of data is to have a notion of what must be carried out in the beginning of a focal group so that it can work in an orderly manner. What are the practical questions wrapped in directing the group? How to maintain the focus in the comparison? These are some enquiring promoters of insights for the ability to produce the qualitative data, answered along the chapter. So, the focal groups constitute an important way for the investigation of how the people form their visions and the moderator must worry about the stimulation of the discussion so that dynamic discussions could be favored in the transcriptions.

Furthermore, the access to cultural paradigms must take place with the use of shared cultural references. The moderator must go search for clarification before presuming the understanding of the discussions. Possibly, the preservation of the focus and the path of the discussion will lead to obtaining spontaneous answers. Also the researcher must

⁵ The term “purgation” was used widely by Freud and, in psychology, the “cathartic element” is the salutary effect provoked by the awareness of a strong emotional and / or traumatic memory, until then repressed.

⁶ We suggest an inquiry with the method of the focal group for the analysis of these means.

⁷ Such as it takes place with the psychotherapists who resort to their supervisors in order to, especially, work the emotional unconscious questions that cross cognitive aspects of the relation between the psychologist and individual(s) that looks for help.

not have the intention of extracting “everything” from his focal groups. That will serve for the favoring of the comparative reflection and anticipation of the analysis.

The suggestion of which the researcher manages, initially, his own data, near a group of friends or colleagues, is supplied in the part understanding the data of the focal group. In spite of Barbour objectifying the understanding of the paper of the models of codification and the perception of the relevance of the theory substantiated like an approach for the codification and analysis, perhaps this is the most confusing part of the book.

We know that the qualitative methods supply insights of social constructions carried out by the participants of the group and that the role individual approaches and styles of learning serve as foundation for the difference of the codes beforehand and the present codes of the researchers. Hence the necessity of using a pragmatic version of the substantiated theory.

The author suggests topic guides in an itinerary format to test the situation chosen in the discussion of the group, which can be done like a sort of test for the production of data with the focal groups. Then, she tries to explain the creation of a provisional codification of categories, alerting, again, that there is no right or wrong way for that.

For many researchers, the use of the focal group method is equivalent to using an approach of analysis of data that follows the substantiated theory based on the use of categories produced by the participants. In this point, the author approaches the necessity of revision of the codification of categories for the researchers and the question of the modeling of encoding paradigms. In the end, she supplies useful directions as to the extraction of the meaning of the data.

The analytical challenges in the inquiry with focal groups consist of the appreciation of the questions associated to a more deep analysis, in the understanding of the characteristics of the group that exceed the analysis, in the interpretation of the silence and complexities of the analysis and in the understanding of identifying patterns in the discussions. For that, Barbour quotes the use of interactions and group dynamics for analytical advantage, alerting that the “great dividends can be obtained when the

proper attention is paid to what is happening during a moment of interaction, once the whole can be infinitely bigger than the sum of all parts” (p. 166).

The author also calls the researcher to observe the following aspects: the caution not to use the passage out of context; the attentiveness to what is happening in the dynamic of the group; to pay attention to the individual voices; to think about the differences between groups in sense of, possibly, having unclear explanations in the decisions of the samples of the researcher; to identify the explanation of the unexpected similarities between the groups, as the differences; to use some type of enumeration; to recognize the importance of the silences as being explanatory and, finally, to reflexively use the reactions themselves to the extracts of the discussions of focal group.

Barbour finishes his work with the development of focal groups, considering how the groups they can be fully used, besides outlining some limitations and emphasizing the possibility of a comparative focus with the final objective to perfect the analytical sophistication. The author makes reference to the presentation of verifications of the focal groups in the sense of making them transferable. And, before weaving the final comments about the philosophical and epistemological basis of the focal groups as a qualitative method, she presents the most promising last developments as the use of virtual groups in the online collection of data.

Concluding, the book stops the idea that “there is no substitute for quite thought out projects whose projections of inquiry allow the focal groups to be used to its highest potentialities” (p. 193). Nevertheless, we emphasize that the author could have used shorter periods for the description of her paragraphs, once shorter sentence periods can facilitate the understanding of such a complex subject.

Also the exhaustive references of the subsequent and previous chapters make for a quite unattractive and tiring reading. One or the other: either do not mention that the subject is in the near chapter or bring the next one to the current subject.

However, none of the observations above are able to take away the brilliance and the importance of the work, which can be much help to the researchers who take the risk using the development and choice of a method that is much alike the characteristics

of the psychotherapeutic intervention of group. Invariably, that approximates the role of the researcher to that of a psychologist and, for this motive, one will have to be attentive not to fall in the traps of turning an inquiry into a therapeutic process.

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