

AN EXPLORATION ON THE USEFULNESS OF FOCUS GROUPS IN PEACE RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Focus groups as a new trend in the social sciences and peace and conflict studies research are becoming a widely accepted tool in the search for rich qualitative data. The researcher must be careful, however, not to rely exclusively on focus groups, as data collected through this approach continues to remain group data—that is, reflecting collective notions negotiated and shared by the group. Focus groups are a useful tool for learning more about the needs, preferences or concerns of those that are beneficiaries of projects. The use of focus group discussion often result in the collection of open ended responses which come up also because of the probing that the facilitator and the participants may engage in. The open ended responses come up since FGDs are used to gather in-depth information about an issue. Open ended responses produced from FGDs may be difficult to group into categories. In other words data analysis of the data that is collected using focus groups is time consuming and needs to be well planned in advance . If an evaluator collects data from people wanting to evaluate the impact, effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and sustainability of a project implemented to enhance their knowledge on life skills there will be huge open ended responses that will be collected from a number of focus groups.

1.0 Introduction

Peace research is for the moment fragmented, with many of the most keenly involved researchers working in isolation. A number of university departments and other institutions engaged in peace and conflict studies have, however, acquired some fame, including the Department of Peace and Conflict Research of Uppsala University, the Department of Peace and Development Research (PADRIGU) in Gothenburg, the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), the University of Bradford in Yorkshire and the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, Transcend in Norway, and the University of Maryland (Ardin, 2012).

Much of the literature in the field, however, whether by practitioners or scholars, flows from a perspective that presumes the applicability of certain tools, devices, and methodologies in all

cultural settings. A critical need exists for a comprehensive research perspective that arises from and speaks to the particularities, needs, aspirations, and insights of persons working in Africa, bypassing the military-industrial power centres of North American and European universities and think tanks. Furthermore, peace research today must address fundamental trends and forces that give rise to violent upheaval and discord.

In order for researchers to be able to systematically collect data in peace research and to systematically assess in an objective way in research there is need to employ some data collection instruments. There are a variety of instruments that a researcher may choose from depending on the purpose of the research and they include focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, observations and questionnaires. The focus of this paper is on ascertaining and deliberating on the advantages and disadvantages of Focus groups as a data collection instrument in peace research. The discussion obviously will make comparison of the instrument to other data collection tools used in peace research as it deliberates on the merits and demerits of focus groups.

2.0 Conceptualization of Focus Group and their Role in Peace Research

Focus groups as a new trend in the social sciences and peace and conflict studies research are becoming a widely accepted tool in the search for rich qualitative data. The researcher must be careful, however, not to rely exclusively on focus groups, as data collected through this approach continues to remain group data—that is, reflecting collective notions negotiated and shared by the group (Berg 2001).

Focus groups are a useful tool for learning more about the needs, preferences or concerns of those that are beneficiaries of projects. According to the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) a focus group discussion is a group interview that consists of six to twelve individuals or people who share similar characteristics or a common interest in the process that the project is improving. Rannekamp and Nall (2003) indicate that a focus group consists of six to twelve people who are similar in one or more ways. Depending on the purpose of the research a focus group may consist of individuals who are of the same age group, sex, have similar economic or social background or share a common interest in a project. For instance if there is a research

project of a project on conflict resolution, the researcher may have focus group discussions with the participants. Such groupings will ensure that the individuals put in one group are of a similar age group and an almost equal interest in the project.

Furthermore, the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) and Rannekamp and Nall (2003) indicate that focus groups are guided by a facilitator or moderator based on a pre-determined or set of topics to gather information about opinions or needs of the members uncovering feelings and issues giving richer information. The facilitator is there to create an environment that encourages all the participants to share their perceptions and points of views without any fear or doubt (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007). McLafferty (2004) argues that focus group makes purposeful use of interaction in order to generate data. The researcher or evaluator is actively involved in ensuring that the group members interact so that data is given in the process which is recorded by an assistant and can be tapped by video or audio recording.

The focus group setting allows the comments of each person to be considered in group discussion. Larger groups of participants may be divided into smaller groups to keep participants 'focused' on the issue at hand and to allow them to experience the freedom to express themselves without holding back crucial information. The goal is to allow participants to speak freely and completely about behaviours, attitudes, and opinions they have about specific issues. Because of the dynamic nature of conflict, the availability of informants and subjects of a research undertaking is not guaranteed. People move, and in protracted conflict situations, instability and lack of security may prohibit people from making themselves available for sustained periods of time. The focus group approach therefore provides the means to collect data in a one-off situation, making it useful for engaging transient populations.

3. 0 Merits of Focus Group Discussions

Peace research is a process in an organization that are budgeted for in terms of finances, time and human resources. As peace research is needed to consider the resources that are available hence this brings to fore the issue of selecting data collection methods after consideration of their merits and demerits. Focus groups are quick and relatively easy to set up especially when they are being done in an organization where people are already gathered in a place of work or in the

areas that they benefit from. For example, it is quick and relatively easy to set up a focus group discussion with students in high school as the students will be gathered in a known place and the researcher will use the links that have been established with the school authorities to arrange the focus group quickly.

Focus groups allow for dynamic interactions between and among participating members and the researcher. Group members who may not have had the opportunity to interact in a long time—which is not uncommon in conflict situations—might be brought together to express themselves and to interact with one another. In contrast to the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee in a one-on-one or face-to-face interview, the focus-group discussion places greater emphasis on the viewpoints of participants without structure or guidelines. This does not, however, preclude the use of structured and formal discussions.

Focus groups are also useful when dense sets of observations are not readily available (Morgan 1988). For example, in trying to understand conflict attitudes and behaviours of rebel groups in northern Uganda or Darfur, a researcher may not be able readily to observe these phenomena. Using the focus group may lead to opportunities offering insight into the thinking, attitudes, and behaviours of combatants, as in the case of the LRA in Uganda or the Janjaweed in Darfur.

Overall advantages of employing the focus group are its ability to enable researchers to capture real-life data in a social environment, its flexibility, its high face validity, its quick results, and its low cost. Researchers must remain mindful, however, of the dynamics of group interactions when conducting discussions. Smaller groups are too easily dominated by one or two members, while frustration and boredom can set in with larger groups, as individuals have to wait their turn to respond. In selecting interviewees, a researcher should try to exclude individuals with previous experience in a focus group because these people tend to act as experts. They may constantly try to make their presence felt, which can impair the group's functioning. Interviewees, although not statistically representative of any meaningful population, are largely selected based on relevancy to the topic in order to gauge a general opinion on an issue.

Using Liberians to try to understand the nature of a conflict in Burundi may not provide a researcher with the answers to her research problem. In a similar vein, it is dangerous to use

groups in a conflict that are not quite ready to interact with one another for purposes of gaining insightful information about the attitudes and behaviours of the groups. Selecting groups with characteristics that suit the general research question is an important element in conducting successful focus group discussions.

Rennekamp and Nall (2003) argue that consistently high attendance rates of focus groups can be achieved by using what is known about the individuals to be invited, setting an appropriate date, time and location, making personal contact through visits, sending confirmation letters to those who agree and making a reminder call a day before the event. In a peace research that involves guardians of orphaned and vulnerable children or community leaders it is important to know the individuals such that there is selection of appropriate date, time and location so as to ensure attendance and in this case the local school may be used. However, Morgan and Krueger (1993) argue that the myth that focus groups can be done quickly has led to inappropriate use based on expediency or convenience to the researcher rather than appropriateness to the research purpose.

Morgan and Krueger (1993) maintain that focus groups require planning, effort and resources just like any other research methods so there is need to realistically assess the time and money issues available for the research process. It is Morgan and Krueger (1993)'s argument that focus groups can only be done quickly in very unusual circumstances and that although the group may last one or two hours, it takes time to create effective set of questions, locate appropriate participants and make sense of the data provided. Focus groups can be quick and easy if the researcher is making use of the already established relations within an organization but there is need to thoroughly plan for the focus groups.

Focus groups can be said to be less expensive when compared to the questionnaire. According to the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) one focus group meeting uses fewer resources in terms of money and time when compared to multiple personal interviews or large surveys that use questionnaires that fail to ask the important questions. Interviews require that the researcher visits each respondent so as to conduct the interview on a one on one face to face basis. The need to ask each respondent questions in personal interviews makes them more expensive as compared to the focus group discussion which gathers people at one place to discuss issues. Similarly, with the use of questionnaires there is need to distribute the questionnaires to all the

respondents which is an exercise that is more expensive than the focus group. If for example there is an evaluation of war victims scholarship project it will be less expensive to conduct focus group discussions with the high school students than to conduct personal interviews or distribute questionnaires.

The distribution of questionnaires and conducting personal interviews would be more expensive in terms of the traveling that the researcher would need to do and the time that would be spent conducting the interviews and distributing the questionnaires and collecting them for analysis. Morgan and Krueger (1993) indicate that it's a myth that focus groups are cheap because the research team donates a large amount of labour or the labour is paid from another source. In the case that there is need to hire professionals to conduct the focus groups the total project cost may rise. Focus groups are less expensive in terms of that they gather people for discussion compared to personal interviews or questionnaires where there is need to contact each respondent but in terms of labour cost usually it's overlooked as it's given by the researchers.

One of the merits of the focus group discussions is that they can provide valuable information that is not likely to come from a personal interview or a survey (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007). Focus groups can allow the evaluator to gain insight and understanding into a topic or issue that may be more difficult to explore and dissect with interviews or survey. Focus groups are used to get in-depth information on perceptions, attitudes, experiences, beliefs, complex behaviours and motivations (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Focus groups makes purposeful use of interaction in an informal setup to generate data with a moderator hence they allow discussion of issues that may not be done in personal interviews (McLafferty, 2004).

According to Morgan and Krueger (1993) the use of focus groups is considered when investigating complex behavior and motivation as researchers can examine motivation by comparing the different points of view of the participants' exchange during interactions. For example, if the goal is to understand complex behavior, attitudes, knowledge and experiences like when evaluating a project that offered life skills coaching to high school students in a conflict zone, then focus groups are most suited but of course for understanding the complex behavior there is need for using more than one way (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). In normal circumstances people are not able to articulate their motivations, feelings, attitudes and opinions

so with the group situations they are afforded an opportunity to express them as they are encouraged by the interactions that would be taking place during the focus group discussion.

The point made above in relation to how people can be able to articulate their motivations, feelings, attitudes and opinions in a group situation brings out also another merit of focus groups. The ability to express them is brought about as the facilitator will be making use of the group dynamics to get useful information that individual data collection does not provide. Furthermore, in the focus groups non-verbal responses can be taken note of which can be indications of people's feelings, attitudes and motivations (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007). By observing other group members' non-verbal cues some focus groups participants may then be able to express themselves thus giving data that is necessary to evaluate the project using the different evaluation criteria of impact, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability (IUCN, 2004). Focus groups have an advantage in that they allow the facilitator to learn from the participants' body language, tone of voice and reactions to responses (Information Brief, 2014). The group participants' body language can be a good source of information that will indicate the appropriateness of the project in meeting the beneficiary's needs which the participants may not be able to express orally.

Another advantage of the focus group discussion as a data collection tool in research is that it provides opportunity for the facilitator to probe for further explanation when an initial response is unclear or too brief (Information Brief, 2014). With focus groups, responses can be clarified and expanded upon with probing follow-up questions (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007). Furthermore, as with personal interviews, the focus group discussion also allows the participants to ask clarification of questions from the facilitator or from other group members. According to the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) group members can react to and build upon each other's responses to produce information or ideas that they may not think on their own.

For example, if a researcher is conducting an evaluation of a project that offered life skills coaching to students in war zone areas, focus groups allows the researcher to ask for clarification with regards to responses about behavior change after the coaching sessions which may be unclear. Also the facilitator may ask questions regarding change in behavior which may not be understood by the participants and one participant may give an unclear response which may be

probed by others in a focus group discussion. Such opportunities for the participants to interact are not available when using interviews or questionnaires to gather data for peace research. The probing allows the researcher to get information that will help in establishing why and how the project have given such results and in bringing out data on the indicators that are being monitored.

It is Evaluation Briefs (2008)'s argument that focus group discussions are highly flexible in terms of the number of participants, the number of groups, cost and their duration meaning that they can be used to suit the circumstances of the data gathering exercise. Also focus groups are flexible as the data collection strategy does not require complex sampling strategies (Evaluation Briefs, 2008). For example if one is collecting information to monitor the implementation of a training project to equip farm workers with knowledge on good farming practices, focus groups allows the researcher to determine the number of participants, groups and the duration of each discussion.

The decision on the participants, number of groups and duration will depend on the resources and time available for the collection of data on the indicators to be researched. McLafferty (2004) indicate that there is a lack of consensus on how to organize them including their composition and the appropriate number of participants with some authors suggesting that ten groups are too much (Millward, 1995 quoted in McLafferty, 2004) and others suggest that minimum should be three and maximum twelve (Krueger, 1994 quoted in McLafferty, 2004). McLafferty (2004) views this flexibility as a demerit of the data collection method especially if looking at those researchers that are still starting to use the method but the flexibility allows the peace practitioners to decide on the participants and group number depending on the resources, time and the research questions that need to be answered as set in the terms of reference for a given research.

According to Morgan and Krueger (1993) and Information Brief (2014) one of the merits of the focus group discussion is that it allows the evaluators to learn more about the degree of consensus on a topic or issue which may be necessary for gaining information that would help in addressing the evaluation criteria. Since in a focus group discussion there is interaction which allows participants to share learning and ideas together with building on each other's ideas and

experiences there is establishment of some consensus (Information Brief, 2014). It can be argued that one major part of peace research goal is to learn more about the range of opinions or experiences that people have which gives indications that will answer the monitoring and evaluation questions of what has been done, how has it been done, why have the results been like that, was it effective and efficient and has there been any impact (Morgan and Krueger, 1993 and Kusek and Rist, 2004). As focus groups provide an opportunity to build communication and trust among participants through the interaction there is creation of an environment for the evaluator to get information on the areas of consensus for the monitoring and evaluation process.

4.0 Demerits of Focus Group Discussions

One of the disadvantages of focus group discussions is that they are not easy to conduct and they take considerable time to arrange (Information Brief, 2014). According to the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) focus groups require highly skilled and experienced facilitator who is trained in managing groups so as to get meaningful information that will assist in the researcher. The trained facilitator should be a neutral third party who will be able to guide the group but not to lead the discussion in a predetermined way with the ability to probe participants' answers (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007).

However, getting a facilitator who is a third party with little knowledge on the implementation process of the project under evaluation may lead to the facilitator missing some important issues pertinent to the research. In most cases the evaluator would be the facilitator who may train other field staff to assist with the conduction of the focus groups. Morgan and Krueger (1993) argue that it's a myth that focus groups require moderators with highly developed professional skills as in the field of development there is lack of the trained moderators. In reality it may not be possible to find a good moderator from within the research team although this may be desirable especially when there is need for one with detailed familiarity with the project goals. Morgan and Krueger (1993) notes that too much emphasis on moderator's skills may divert attention from the fact that the outcome of research projects depends on more than the ability to lead a group. With proper planning of the focus groups, definition of the project purpose and who the participants are there will then be determination of the kind of moderator that will be helpful (Morgan and

Krueger, 1993). The need to make a decision on the moderator as indicated above clearly reveals the difficulty of conducting and arranging focus groups.

According to the Evaluation Briefs (2008) one of the disadvantages of FGDs is that they are susceptible to facilitator bias. In this case it should be noted that as a human being a facilitator may have some biases which comes from their background and at times familiarity with the subject matter. The biases that they may have will at times lead the facilitator to ask leading questions which are aimed at getting information that will confirm the biases that the facilitator may have. In some instances if the facilitator is part of the project team they may be biased towards asking questions that will confirm the ideas that were held during the implementation of the project. If such biases are not carefully guarded against by having a trained and skilled facilitator, the data that would be collected from say students will not reflect the implementation of the project necessary for research of the project.

The small size of a focus group does not allow statistically significant generalization of responses to a larger population (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007). The Evaluation Briefs (2008) indicate that the information provided by FGDs is not representative of the other groups which means that there is a challenge with generalization of the results. Since FGDs are a qualitative data collection method it is difficult to generalize the results obtained to the larger population as the information is collected from a small sample. Furthermore, the Office of Quality Improvement (2007) argue that since the focus group discussion members usually attend the meeting voluntarily there might be wondering as to how they differ from or are representative of the larger population and the members may be difficult to recruit. In peace research, however it may be argued that FGDs are useful as they can be conducted to gather data from project participants which will be used to assess that specific project with limited or no need to generalize to the larger population.

The use of focus group discussion oftenly result in the collection of open ended responses which come up also because of the probing that the facilitator and the participants may engage in. The open ended responses come up since FGDs are used to gather in-depth information about an issue. It is the Office of Quality Improvement (2007)'s argument that the open ended responses produced from FGDs may be difficult to group into categories. In other words data analysis of

the data that is collected using focus groups is time consuming and needs to be well planned in advance (Evaluation Briefs, 2008). If an evaluator collects data from people wanting to evaluate the impact, effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and sustainability of a project implemented to enhance their knowledge on life skills there will be huge open ended responses that will be collected from a number of focus groups.

Using either thematic analysis or content analysis to analyze the data, there is need to categorize the data and group them into themes using codes so that there can be establishment of patterns which will assist in coming up with conclusions (IPDET, 2007). The conclusions reached after the establishment of the patterns from the data will then be used to decide on whether the project has been effective, efficient, relevant, has had impact and there is sustainability of the project benefits after withdrawal of external assistance. The analysis of the data collected using focus groups have to be well planned in advance so as to be able to handle the open ended responses.

Another demerit of the FGDs is that the discussion may be dominated or side tracked by a few individuals with opinions presented by assertive focus group members possibly overwhelming ideas held by the rest of the group (Office of Quality Improvement, 2007 and Evaluation Briefs, 2008). In the group discussion there may be some dominating individuals who are very vocal who may make the group to accept them at the expense of the other group members' ideas and opinions. Such a demerit may result in the evaluators getting information that may not reflect how the project is being implemented or may give information that will not show the why and how the results of the project are as they are. The failure of the information to bring out the why and how will result in the data collection method collecting data and producing information that do not adequately assess the results of the project.

Focus groups can be thought of as having a demerit in that they cannot be used to generate valuable information on sensitive issues or topics like income, politics and sex among others. The discussing of sensitive issues may be difficult since people will be in a group situation that requires exchange of ideas and experiences hence some participants may be uncomfortable to discuss sensitive issues in the presence of other people (Evaluation Briefs, 2008). The unwillingness to discuss sensitive issues may be because that some people may fear victimization and having their social status degraded as they will be participating in a community

discussion with people they interact with on a daily basis. However, Morgan and Krueger (1993) argue that it is a myth that people will not talk about sensitive topics in focus groups as this is based on commonsense imaginations of what people might be willing to discuss in groups.

The two further argue that in actual experience that they have had people readily talk of a wide range of personal and emotional topics like family size and birth control but there is need to carefully plan for research involving sensitive topics. Morgan and Krueger (1993) also points out that people will not talk about anything and everything in focus groups so researchers working with sensitive topics must make plans to both encourage appropriate disclosures and discourage inappropriate ones so as to remain within the ethical bounds of research. Likewise it is necessary in research to plan collection of data on sensitive issues and to ensure that there is creation of a conducive environment to conduct the focus groups so that relevant data will be collected that helps in the implementation of the monitoring and evaluation plan and strategy.

5.0 Conclusion

Focus groups are an important and useful data collection method in peace research as they are quick to set up and allow gathering of in-depth data under an interaction environment. The discussions also allow the facilitator and the participants to explore issues to do with experiences, feelings and motivations. The data collection tool is thus helpful in assisting the meeting of the research criteria and the ongoing day to day implementation of the project. Focus group discussions are limited in terms of that they may be susceptible to facilitator bias, there can be domination by a few individuals, the responses are difficult to analyze and there cannot be generalization of the results. With proper planning a researcher can be able to go around the limitations and leverage on the merits of the method which can be used in combination with other data collection methods for effective data collection in peace research.

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