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Focus Group Discussion as a data collection tool in Economics

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the focus group discussion as a data collection tool and provides information for a better understanding of focus group discussion by addressing the questions of what is the meaning of focus group discussion? What are logistics needed? Its advantages and limitations, how leader behaviors necessary to keep focus group discussion going? And its application in economic data collection. The secondary data were drawn from a pool of research papers and sourced from journal articles, related books, published training manual and websites that specify key elements of the focus group discussion and find that focus group discussion has different definitions, types and it is highly valued as a qualitative research data collection tool, especially for its ability to generate in-depth understandings to a topic in an effective and timely manner. It can be a cost-effective, quick approach to data collection and relatively easier to conduct. But it has some limitations and logistical difficulties involved such as groupthink and accuracy, harder to get everyone in the same place at the same time. Above these challenges, focus group discussion as a data collection tool is seen as effective and even less resource-intensive compared to other methods. Yet it requires proper planning and organization.

Keywords: Data collection, Economics , Focus Group, Qualitative research

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are two types of data; these are primary and secondary data. The primary data are those which are collected afresh and for the first time, and thus happen to be original. The secondary data, on the other hand, are those which have already been collected by someone else and which have already been passed through the statistical process. The researcher would have to decide which sort of data would be used in the study and accordingly select one or the other method of data collection. The methods of collecting primary and secondary data differ since primary data are to be originally collected, while in the case of secondary data the nature of data collection work is merely that of compilation. Data collection is a very demanding job that needs thorough planning, hard work, patience, determination, and more to be able to complete the task successfully. It starts with determining what kind of data is required followed by the selection of a sample from a certain population. After that, the researcher needs to use a certain instrument to collect the data from the selected sample.

One of the instruments that collect primary data is focus group discussion. A focus group discusses issues and questions of importance on a topic of mutual concern and its purpose of the discussion is to understand concepts and issues, to increase participation in the data collection session, and to draw on the experience and expertise of participants, discussion involves two-way communication between participants. It is how focus group discussion participants share experiences, ideas, and attitudes. Focus group discussions are a data collection method that data is collected through a semi-structured group interview process. Focus groups are generally used to collect data on a specific topic. Focus group methods emerged in the 1940s with the work of Merton and Fiske who used focus groups to conduct consumer satisfaction (Kabir, 2018).

The objective of this paper is to *reviews* the literature on focus group discussion as a data collection tool and provides information for a better understanding of focus group discussion by addressing the questions; what is focus group discussion? What are the Logistics of focus group discussion? What are the advantages and limitations of Focus Group Discussion? How leader behaviors necessary to keep FGD going? Is focus group discussion utilized in economic data collection?

Based on the theoretical review and integrative research review, the paper data and information have synthesized in the accumulated state of knowledge on similar and related data to the focus group discussion. The data for this paper were drawn from a pool of research papers. Secondary data were sourced from journal articles, related books, published training, and websites that specify key elements of the focus group discussion and explain its definition, logistics needed, advantage and its limitations, leader's behaviors, and utilization of focus group discussion as data collection tool in economics. It is expected that this paper will provide a crystal clear answer to the research questions. I focus on an understanding of the theoretical and empirical prospects of focus group discussion to propose policy recommendations.

2. DEFINITION AND TYPES OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

2.1 Definition and types of Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussion is a technique where a researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995)

A focus group discussion is a loosely structured discussion among six to ten individuals that are used to gather information on a particular research or program topic (Debus, 1998).

From the above concepts, we can understand that, a focus group discussion is a qualitative research data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator.

Focus group analysis is the process of organizing and examining information to find meaning in it. According to Krueger (as cited in De Negri & Thomas 2003), analysis is like detective work. After conducting the focus group discussions, you must read through lots of notes, organize them, and then look for "clues" that will help you to make sense of it all. This takes a lot of time and needs that you know the information very well.

2.2 Types of Focus Group Discussion

According to Ochieng et al., (2018), there are a total of seven types of focus group discussion, of which five are main types identified in the literature, and a further two are emerging with the growth in access and variety of online platforms. First, a single focus group; is the interactive discussion of a topic by a collection of participants and a team of facilitators as one group in one place. It is the most common and classical type of focus group discussion (Morgan, 1996). It has been commonly used by both researchers and practitioners across different disciplines (Wilkinson, 1998). Second, a two-way focus group involves using two groups where one group actively discusses a topic, whereas the other observes the first group and usually, this type of focus group is conducted behind one-way glass. The observing group and the moderator can observe and note the interactions and discussion of the first group without being seen and hearing what the other groupthink or by observing their interaction often leads the second group to different conclusions than those it may have reached otherwise (Morgan, 1996).

Third, a dual moderator focus group, contains two moderators working together, each performing a different role within the same focus group and the division of roles ensures a smooth development of the session and ensures that all topics are covered. Fourth, the dueling moderator focus group involves two moderators who purposefully take opposing sides on an issue or topic under investigation (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The proponents consider that the introduction of contrary views to the discussion by the moderators is critical to achieving more in-depth disclosure of data and information (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Five, respondent moderator focus group, researcher hires some of the participants to take up a temporary role of moderators. Having one

of the participants lead the discussion is thought to impact the dynamics of the group by influencing participants' answers, it increasing the chances of varied and more honest responses. The other two are, mini focus group, researchers are usually faced with a situation where there is a small potential pool of participants and difficult to reach, yet the research design needs that the topic must be discussed in a group. Under these situations, researchers can only convene a small group of between two and five participants but such groups are usually made up of individuals with a high level of expertise (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

And the last one is online focus groups; it is not a different type of focus group discussion, it is applied within the online environment, using conference calling, chat rooms, or other online means. Online focus groups boast an impression of dynamism, modernity, and competitiveness that transcends classic problems with face to face focus group discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). However, the discussion platforms are only accessible to participants with access to the Internet and prone to technical problems such as poor or loss of connectivity and failure to capture nonverbal data (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991).

The main means of data collection during a focus group discussion include audio and tape recording, note-taking, and participant observation. Besides, the types of questions in the focus group are to be in sequence of deductive questioning that is from general to specific, as recommended, which has: first, questions of engagement: it begins the session with questions that put the participants at ease and create a conducive environment accessible to participation. Second, questions of exploration: it is penetrating, well-constructed group members 'questions that get to the main target of the discussion. And lastly, questions of exit: it presents, if there is anything more or further suggestions regarding the topic, and check if there is missed anything (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

According to USAID (2011), there are a few common steps that are mostly taken when designing and implementing focus group discussions. These are: - first, select the team to facilitate the discussions by considered good practice to have at least two people conducting focus group discussions. One person facilitates the discussion whilst the other takes notes. Second, identify the groups and participants that will take part that is participants should be from similar backgrounds and should be able to discuss matters freely with each other. This is why focus group discussions are often carried out with separate groups. Third, decide on the timing and location of the meetings, which is generally last up to two hours. Wherever possible, they should be located in a convenient space where people can discuss matters in comfort and with some degree of privacy.

Fourth, develop a set of questions or a discussion guide; this can be as simple as a checklist containing a few broad, guiding questions. 2-3 questions are normally considered sufficient for a focus group discussion, as it is important to allow time for the questions to be discussed at length. The fifth step, conduct and record the focus group discussions, each discussion should start with a brief introduction, explaining the purpose of the session, and ensuring that participants know how the information will

be used, and also discussions should be recorded as they happen. Sixth, analyses the data; it can be done in two stages after each focus group discussions took place, the facilitation team should review the records of the discussions to identify any key themes emerging, and then once all focus group discussions have been completed, the data can be examined to look for common trends and patterns.

3. LOGISTICS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

3.1 Time

Regardless of the number of focus group discussion meetings, it is important to consider the duration of the meetings. Participants are likely to suffer from fatigue when discussions are longer. The rule of thumb is 1–2 hr., based on the complexity of the topic under investigation, the number of questions, and the number of participants. This might differ when the group consists of younger participants such as school children, this is because children tend to have shorter attention spans and will begin to lose focus and interest in the topic quicker than adults (Gibson, 2012).

3.2 Number of Panelists

Although there is no iron-clad rule about how many focus groups are enough, the number of focus group discussions to hold depends on the type and complexity of the research topic. Focus group discussions should generate sufficient data to allow for comparisons and to generate and test theoretical ideas (Barbour 2005). A focus group typically consists of around 6 to 12 target participants engaged in a discussion with a research moderator. Whereas Prince and Davies‘(2001) explain that small-sized groups of 4 to 6 may be productive as they encourage members to actively participate in the discussion and subsequently, a considerable amount of different ideas may be generated on the topic in discussion within a certain time limit. But According to Krueger (1994) argues that focus group research should comprise a minimum of three groups.

3.3 Equipment that used for Focus Group Discussion

Equipment used in focus group discussions is in one to one focus group discussion like Tape recorder, lapel, microphone, quiet room are used whereas in other focus groups discussion like Tape recorder, oval/round table/table microphone, props such as flashcards, leaflets, access to a photocopier, Sheets of paper (A4 or letter size), Scissors, Tape or glue are required.

3.4 Moderator (Facilitator)

Focus group discussion requires a team consisting of a skilled facilitator and an assistant (Krueger, 1994).

Moderators who display an intrinsic interest in the research topic, overt friendliness, a sense of humor, an insatiable interest in people, curiosity and openness to new insights, and a willingness to listen are more likely to encourage participants to share their experiences. (Prince and Davies, 2001, p. 208)

The moderator's role is to guide the focus group discussions by questioning predetermined questions and to ensure a good quality of focus group results that address the research objectives. In other words, the moderator, who guides the discussion, encourages participants to talk freely and reveal their thoughts and feelings

about the research topic, is central to the discussion not only by managing existing relationships but also by creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for unfamiliar participants. Similarly, the assistant's role includes observing non-verbal interactions and the impact of the group dynamics and documenting the general content of the discussion, thereby supplementing the data (Kitzinger, 1995). Non-verbal data rely on the behavior and actions of the respondent's pre-focus group discussion, during, and post focus group discussion. The moderator, a well-trained expert who works from a predetermined set of focus group discussion topics, raises issues identified in a discussion guide and uses probing questions to solicit opinions, ideas, and other information, often as it relates to a project or other activity.

3.5 Note-taker roles

A wealth of valuable information can be raised during a focus group discussion, but to for it to be analyzed and used, the assistant moderator must accurately and comprehensively record it. Different data from the focus group discussion can be recorded in different ways, but generally, it will involve some kind of note-taking and also possibly audio or video recording. The note-taker may ask quick, clarifying questions to the facilitator or the participants, if needed. The note-taker may help the facilitator, if necessary, by driving out questions that are not well explored or missed and be discreet or neutral as possible that the focus group discussion participants do not surprise or worry about what is being written down while they talk.

4 ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

4.1 Advantage

Focus groups are a primary format for qualitative research. This is a type of research that seeks open-ended thoughts and feelings from consumers, as opposed to quantitative research that involves numerical-based data collection.

According to Asmamaw, Mohammed, & Lulseged, (2011) the most compelling reason for using focus group discussion is the need to generate discussion or debate about a research topic that requires collective views and the meanings that lie behind those views including their experiences and beliefs. Focus groups and other qualitative techniques are rich in detail and often provide surprises on what people may think of a product. Focus groups allow for broader and deeper insights into the brand and related topics versus very precise and structured quantitative research studies. It also offers an opportunity to research small children who may not read well enough to complete surveys or questionnaires. This is quite different from quantitative surveys or studies which limit respondents to single-word or short phrase multiple-choice responses. Focus groups are allowed for interactive research with a small group as opposed to individual responses on surveys. Through this interaction, moderators get the content from responses, and they get to observe the group and pick up on emotional responses, contradictions, stress, anger, frustration, enthusiasm, and other feelings that do not come through a structured questionnaire. Some companies have invested significantly in new technology and software to collect research data, but relatively low-cost focus groups remain one of the more productive consumer research techniques. Focus groups

generally require little to no technology and are often completed in just a few hours on one day.

4.2 Disadvantage

Two common disadvantages of focus groups are groupthink and accuracy. Moderators may tend to generalize or categorize individual feedback into group sentiment. Additionally, those with strong influence, such as the moderator and vocal group members, can sway the conversation and make it seem one-dimensional or quash feedback from less vocal participants.

Response accuracy is a concern because when participants know they are involved in research for a particular brand or company, they may feel less comfortable speaking out against that brand in front of the moderator and company onlookers. That is focus group discussion participants are sometimes reluctant to discuss sensitive topics in a discussion setting compared with an individual interview or a survey.

Harder to get everyone in the same place at the same time, difficulties preventing a particularly vocal or dominant participant from coercing others to agree with his/her views, data obtained are very context or specific and therefore not generalizable to other institutions or contexts

There are also several limitations to focus group discussions that are important to consider. These are: it requires advanced planning; it calls for getting together a set of people at the same place and time, which usually requires invitations to be distributed and confirmed in advance. Surveys and individual interviews also require planning to design the instruments and schedule the data collection sessions. However, the fact that FGI's require a group often implies greater coordination. Limited generalizability, is common, the prospective number of interviewees involved with a project is relatively large, and collecting the viewpoints of the limited number of people included in focus group discussions does not give evaluators a sample of sufficient size to be able to conclude the whole population. Therefore, focus group discussions are not intended to answer questions of "how much" or "to what extent" a service, result, or opinion exists in the whole population. Surveys or other quantitative data usually fill this role. It is Vulnerable to moderator bias, the moderator plays a central role throughout the focus group discussions process, especially when guiding the discussion and interpreting the results. The thoughtful design of the moderator's guide, accurate recording, systematic coding, and involvement of more than one individual in the data analysis can help minimize, but not eliminate, the risk of bias. On the other hand, in-person and telephone surveys, as well as individual interviews, also are susceptible to this kind of bias. And limited confidentiality, there are rare instances in which people may be more forthcoming in a group discussion than they would be on an individual basis; in most cases, participants will be less likely to share very personal or sensitive information when they are speaking with a group. To collect such data, evaluators can use surveys or individual interviews, where the privacy of the data collection can help to protect confidentiality (USAID, 2013).

5 LEADER BEHAVIORS NECESSARY TO KEEP FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GOING

The team leader is a person who supervises the research team, oversees the systematic coding and organization of information, keeps the original copies of the information, notes, and tapes in a safe place, provides guidance for interpretation, ultimately responsible for the final report, even if parts of it are written by other members of the team. Besides, the leader participates in the focus groups in one way or another i.e., the leader is a moderator, note-taker, or observer. If this is not possible, then the team leader should spend some time in the field observing the focus groups and working with the team immediately following the focus groups. In this scenario, the moderators, note-takers, and observers can help the team leader organize, read, and code the information. They can also brief the team leader on their impressions of the group, including group dynamics and nonverbal communication.

6 SUMMARY OF A STUDY THAT UTILIZED FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

According to Morgan (1996) suggested that focus group discussions can be used as a stand-alone method or in combination with other methods as an exploratory or as a follow-up tool. Focus groups are used for economic research situations to explore and identify issues of satisfaction for customers, staff, or suppliers and to explore views of brand and service delivery associated with the brand. It has its merits as well as its restrictions as a data collection tool, and it should primarily be used in a triangulation approach to qualitative economic researches. Triangulation, or using more than one source of data gathering technique, boosts the validity and often allows for greater generalizability. Outcomes gathered from focus group discussions alone will not completely access the natural perceptions of participants, but it can be very useful in the initial research stages or to validate the participants' perceptions on a given research topic either during a study or as an ex-post evaluation of a product or business. Emphasis should be placed on focus group discussions as a method of catching dynamic real-life interaction among participants when research topics assess individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. Focus group discussions are an efficient tool in qualitative consumer and marketing research data collection when conducted from a truly qualitative perspective through segmenting target participants into smaller subgroups according to specific, categorical attributes such as gender, job title, etc. Its success lies in the researcher's ability to utilize focus group discussions to uncover the why behind and what in participant communication while getting to the core of the producers' and or consumers' beliefs.

7 Conclusion and Recommendation

7.1 Conclusion

This paper reviews the literature on focus group discussion as a data collection tool and provides information for a better understanding of focus group discussion by addressing the questions of what is the meaning of focus group discussion? What are logistics needed? Its advantages and limitations, how leader behaviors necessary to

keep focus group discussion going? and its application in economic data collection. The accessed literature shows that focus group discussion has different definitions, types, and steps. It is highly valued as a qualitative research data collection tool, especially for its ability to generate in-depth understandings into a topic in an effective and timely manner and can be a cost-effective and quick approach to data collection. It is relatively easier to conduct as all the group participants and the moderator are readily available in one location at the same time and the types of questions in the focus group discussions are to be in sequence of deductive questioning that is from general to specific.

Regardless of some of the limitations and logistical difficulties involved such as groupthink and accuracy, harder to get everyone in the same place at the same time, this data collection tool is seen as effective and even less resource-intensive compared to other methods and requires a team consisting of a skilled moderator and an assistant. Whereas, when focusing group discussion used in a triangulation, it can help the researcher to access a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by furnishing results on social interactions to meaningful construction. Yet, it requires proper planning and organization.

7.2 Recommendation

In this paper by reviewing the available researchers' studies, I have seen focus group discussion is important in discussing issues and questions of importance on a topic of mutual concern and its purpose of the discussion is to more thoroughly understand concepts and issues. By taking the above explanation as an input for policy interventions the researcher, leader, the moderator should focus on:

Leaders and facilitators should know the research topic itself will direct the nature of focus group discussion, making it a flexible and unique tool for gaining in-depth understanding and gathering diverse group members' opinions and perspectives on a comprehensive range of subjects. Facilitators should know beforehand which topics can safely be covered within a focus group and which cannot and also should keep an eye on the note taker and allow him or her to catch up, before moving to the next question or topic. Moderators or facilitators should remind that the potential risks that groupthink can pose on the result of focus group discussion by ensuring a fair distribution of opportunities to all participants to voice out their perceptions. The note taker should be as modest and neutral as likely so that the focus group discussion participants do not surprise or worry about what is being written down when they talk. The frequent use of this tool should make a highly collaborative process for participants and an opportunity for the leader to gain multiple perspectives on an interesting topic.

Finally, I suggest that focus group discussions can also be useful when combined with quantitative studies and that this gives a strong triangulation research design.

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