Evaluation and Program Planning 34 (2011) 21–28

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Evaluation and Program Planning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/evalprogplan

A proposed model for the analysis and interpretation of focus groups in evaluation research

Oliver T. Massey *

Policy Division, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida, 13301 Bruce Downs Blvd. MHC 2-331, Tampa, FL 33612, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 January 2010
Received in revised form 9 June 2010
Accepted 28 June 2010

Keywords:
Focus groups
Thematic analysis
Evaluation methods

ABSTRACT

Focus groups have an established history in applied research and evaluation. The fundamental methods of the focus group technique have been well discussed, as have their potential advantages. Less guidance tends to be provided regarding the analysis of data resulting from focus groups or how to organize and defend conclusions drawn from the analysis. This article reviews the methodology of the focus group with an emphasis on thematic analysis of latent data at three levels, articulated, attributional, and emergent. The three levels are described and illustrated with respect to their value and contribution to evaluation within the framework of the group method and qualitative standards of thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

Evaluation researchers increasingly use both qualitative and quantitative methods in their evaluation efforts. Among the more common qualitative methods of obtaining data are focus group techniques. Focus groups have been described as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 1994; p. 6). They combine elements of both interviewing and participant observation, and provide an opportunity to probe the participants' cognitive and emotional responses while also observing underlying group dynamics (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996).

Groups are typically composed of six to twelve homogeneous participants and a trained moderator, although larger and smaller groups have sometimes been recommended (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Groups last perhaps two hours, with time divided equally in the discussion of a small number of questions that are introduced through a questioning route or discussion guide. The group setting and the moderator's ability to offer helpful prompts are designed to encourage an insightful discussion of the pertinent issues among the group members. The resulting data offers a robust alternative to more traditional survey methods when absolute numbers of respondents are less important than is a rich investigation of content.

One expressed purpose of the focus group is to learn more about attitudes and opinions (Hyden & Bulow, 2003), although for others, the more important criterion is the capacity to learn about the typically unspoken social norms, expectations, and cultural understandings that emerge from deeper analysis of conversational exchanges (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Nichols, 2002). They offer 'content as well as expression' (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 385). In evaluation, we might find value in both sets of analyses, with the understanding that the same data may not obtain for both purposes.

Focus groups are also unique in that they allow data both from the individual, and from the individual as part of a larger group. Some suggest that the group serves as the fundamental unit of analysis (Morgan, 1997), such that even when reporting a single response, it is being expressed in a larger social context (Hollander, 2004). Others suggest that the communication process among and across members is most important (Myers & Macnaghten, 2001). Hyden and Bulow (2003), and Kitzinger (1994), suggest that the data emerging from the group includes both individual elements and elements that emerge uniquely as members of a group. The interaction of group members produces something that is not reducible to individual members (Hyden & Bulow, 2003) nor group opinions (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993).

To obtain data, most focus groups use a questioning route or discussion guide. These guides include a select group of questions or discussion points that are designed to both elicit conversation among participants and also guide their commentary to the most fruitful areas of discussion (Greenbaum, 2000; Myers & Macnaghten, 2001). The guide is designed to elicit the most compelling and telltale responses from participants. The discussion guide is often the foundation on which to base subsequent written reports (Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger, 1994).

However, the analysis of data is not limited to simply recording responses to articulated questions. While the focus group discussion includes information specific to the guide, it also

* Tel.: +1 813 974 6403; fax: +1 813 974 6257.
E-mail address: massey@fmhi.usf.edu.

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doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2010.06.003

includes inevitable digressions as participants shape and reframe questions. The questions may undergo reformulation as the participants shift conversations (Myers & Macnaghten, 2001). At other times, the questions may be designed to stimulate discussion without directly interrogating the participants regarding the issues of interest (Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Morgan, 1997). This will include situations where the researcher has developed hypotheses or research questions that may be addressed without direct questioning (Massey, Armstrong, Boroughs, Henson, & McCash, 2005). The resulting data extends beyond the preconceived questions included in the guide (Flores & Alonso, 1995).

2. Focus groups in evaluation

In evaluation research, focus groups have been shown to be an effective way to obtain a diverse range of information (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997). Focus groups may be used to answer the same type of questions as in-depth interviews, but in a social context (Armstrong & Massey, 2002; Boaz, Ziebland, Wyke, & Walker, 1998; Watson & Robertson, 1996). They are helpful in understanding how stakeholders regard specific experiences or incidents (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2001; Krueger, 1994; Wibeck, Dahlgren, & Oberg, 2007), fill in gaps in meaning (Kitzinger, 1994) and help understand the 'why' behind attitudes and behaviors (Greenbaum, 2000). For evaluators, focus groups are also potentially more culturally sensitive and empowering (Chiu & Knight, 2001; Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Kress & Shoffner, 2007), and may assist participants come to mutual understanding of issues under discussion (Wibeck et al., 2007).

While the focus group method is widely used, a common critique of this method is the lack of detail regarding techniques for data analysis and interpretation (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Hurworth, 2003; Myers & Macnaghten, 2001; Webb & Kevern, 2001). Morgan (1997), has suggested that analysis is not described in more detail due to the tacit understanding that analysis can take many forms based on the purpose of the study. The method of data collection should match the purpose, and analysis may be different based on the expressed purpose of the group and the needs of the research (Fern, 2001; Frankland & Bloor, 2001; Morgan, 1997). Others suggest that the methods may not be scientific enough to merit description, or may rest solely within the prerogative of the researcher (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992). The difficulty may also lie with the sheer volume of alternatives for the analysis of qualitative data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Tesch, 1990).

In evaluation efforts, this lack of specification has led to general suggestions for analysis involving traditional qualitative methods. Three forms of qualitative analysis associated with focus groups include grounded theory, phenomenological approaches, and thematic analysis. While each of these techniques might provide a solid foundation on which to analyze evaluation efforts, the terms are applied loosely. Little detail has been provided as to how analysis might consistently occur, nor of descriptions of the limitations of the methods.

Grounded theory is inductive and iterative with analysis co-occurring with reflexive data collection for the purpose of theory generation (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Charmaz, 2008; Dick, n.d.). The process involves a feedback loop, where data collection, analysis, and hypothesis generation co-occur. Analysis of one set of data shapes the questions posed in the next iteration. Data collection continues while the results are refined (Dick, n.d.; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The use of grounded theory typically presumes that hypotheses are emergent and arise from the cycle of data collection and analysis.

Unfortunately, this iterative approach to the construction of meaning rarely appears in evaluation oriented focus groups. Webb and Kevern (2001) noted the tendency for researchers to use the terminology of grounded theory when describing focus group research, while failing to follow a consistent qualitative methodology either in organization or analysis. In their review of the utilization of focus groups in nursing research, only one of the 33 studies involved methods following an iterative approach (Webb & Kevern, 2001). While grounded theory holds promise, few studies apparently utilize the continuous recursive methodology associated with this analysis. More typically, groups are conducted only once, or numerous unique groups are conducted that cover the same or similar topics without taking advantage of earlier results. Once data collection is completed, analysis begins. The feedback loop, if any occurs, is framed as an opportunity for participants to offer feedback and confirm conclusions, rather than as part of inductive hypothesis generation (Hardy, Teruya, Longshore, & Hser, 2005; Webb & Kevern, 2001).

A second approach to the analysis of focus groups emphasizes a more phenomenological perspective where the participants, as co-researchers, search for the essential meaning found in their shared experiences (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Creswell, 2007; Wilkinson, 1998). As with grounded theory, phenomenology suggests the need for a recursive process including in-depth and multiple interviews with participants with the purpose of moving beyond naïve preconceptions and subjective experiences (Creswell, 2007; McNamara, 2005).

Within an evaluation framework, grounded theory and phenomenology lend themselves to action research models such as participatory and empowerment evaluation. The emphasis in these participatory approaches tend toward sharing the experiences and reality of the participants and empowering their role in partnership with evaluators (Andonian, 2008; Holte-McKenzie, Forde, & Theobald, 2006; Nichols, 2002). The action research model includes continuing review and an emphasis on situational definitions and shared meanings (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008; Morrison & Lilford, 2001; Trondsen & Sandaunet, 2009). As action research, the focus group participants are empowered through their mutual discovery of the meaning of their experiences. The perspectives include such principles as ownership, participation, and self-evaluation (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Group members are active participants in discovering meaning and relevance as part of the group process. Stakeholder participation is critical, not simply as sources of collecting data, but also as sources of the meaning of data (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Holte-McKenzie et al., 2006).

Both of these approaches to the analysis of focus group data are consistent with qualitative research principles, but appear infrequently. In addition, while these approaches are valuable, evaluation research often asks something different from participants. Evaluators are often engaged in descriptive analysis of programs or policies or hypothesis testing.

A third approach, thematic analysis, offers a meaningful and common alternative for the analysis of evaluation oriented focus groups (Boyatzis, 1998; Frankland & Bloor, 2001; Webb & Kevern, 2001; Wiggins, 2004), when the intent is to understand the underlying themes and relationships that explain the organization, functioning, or impacts associated with a program (Krueger & Casey, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000). This approach suggests that qualitative analysis involves the search for common themes emerging from group dynamics and the open interplay among participants. These themes may reflect a range of individual attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, as well as touching on otherwise unarticulated norms and social values (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). In a review of published evaluation research using focus groups (Wiggins, 2004), thematic analysis was the most common approach to data analysis. Unfortunately, this approach to the identification of themes appears to occur with little guidance regarding the organization or techniques of analysis (Ryan &