

THE USE OF THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

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Abstract

The focus group method continues to gain applicability in social work research. The article provides the rationale to use focus groups for a variety of research purposes in social work context. It aims at discussing practical aspects that constitute focus group research process. Based on the author's research experience and common guidelines for focus groups in social research, in addition specific implications coming from social work context are outlined. Though it is considered that focus groups are relatively easy to conduct, the article shows that in practice a researcher has to be aware of possible difficulties as well as alternative approaches towards focus group process. The role of moderator, selection of participants, deciding upon structure as well as technical requirements are discussed in detail. An exemplary framework for focus group discussion is provided for efficient planning and moderating of focus group. The article aims at social work practitioners who may find focus group useful for their research needs providing with tips for efficient practice of focus group research.

Keywords: *qualitative research methods, focus group, social work research.*

Introduction

Research has become an integral part of social work practice. Social work research is an important source of knowledge for social workers and its value has been proved in many cases (Krysik and Finn, 2010). The function of research for social work can be summarised in brief: to acquire knowledge that is scientifically grounded and can be used with confidence. Scientific approach as a logical and systematic process reduces the risk of errors common for everyday reasoning (Engel and Schutt, 2010).

What is specific about social work research is that the aims of research are related to enhancing social conditions of other people: "... the purpose of social work research is to create applied knowledge; that is, we use research to develop knowledge that will inform social work practice" (Krysik and Finn, 2010, p. 10). Social workers daily engage in practice of making a positive impact when solving variety of problems. Therefore, using research as a way of knowing allows confident assessment whether social work practice had any kind of effects, whether these effects were positive, when due effects were not reached and how can it be changed. Social work research aims at providing scientifically grounded knowledge applicable for evaluating or improving programmes, practices, interventions; assessing client or community needs; evaluating effects of social policies, or solving specific problems (Rubin and Babbie, 2010).

A variety of social research methods is used for social work needs. Both quantitative and qualitative or mixed research approach is applied and the whole range of data collection methods are applied starting with one of most common survey research and ending with extended research strategies like action research. The article aims at enhancing practical research skills applicable for social worker professional in their practice. It discusses one of possible ways to collect information for many of purposes (will be outlined later), namely—the focus group method.

Originating in marketing and consumer research, the focus group method recently found its place in social sciences including social work research (Cohen and Garret, 1999; Linhorst, 2002; Ansay, Pekins and Nelson, 2004). Focus group method can be appropriately used in a variety of ways in social work research: developing or evaluating programmes; assessing needs for programme or social service; assessing consumer satisfaction; designing staff training; examining volunteer practices in a target group, and multitude of other specific topics and in relation to variety of target groups (community subgroups, consumers of a service, employees, members of a professional group, volunteers, etc.) (Linhorst, 2002; Rubbin and Babbie, 2010; Krysik and Finn, 2010).

Having in mind that social work research is used extensively to create *applied* knowledge focus group method is very relevant. Focus group research provides with speedy results, simultaneously covering variety of ideas, opinions, experiences, needs, evaluations, or concerns coming from a group of participants. However, the use of focus groups in social work research depends on many practical issues that can both enhance or restrict the limits of applicability and effectiveness. Research in social work context usually deals with specific topics and populations. Therefore, common guidelines for focus groups research shall be adjusted to social work context requirements.

The **purpose** of the article is to discuss practical aspects that constitute focus group research process with linkage to special needs of social work context.

The **object** of the article is the process of focus group research applicable for social work research. The article covers following **questions**: (a) what are the advantages and disadvantages of focus group research? (b) What are the main elements when planning focus groups in social work research? (c) How to structure and run focus group discussion?

The article is based on author's research experience; common guidelines for focus groups in social research, and specific implications coming from social work context and research.

1. What is focus group research?

Focus group is a qualitative research method. It is an organised conversation with a small group of purposefully selected participants and focused on particular research topic. Focus group is a type of interview usually guided by a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire (or focus group scenario). However, this is not a type of a simply group interview where a session of questions-answers with group of people is processed. The aim of focus group research is *discussion* among participants. Active *interaction* of participants is added value of focus group method in comparison to individual interviews or survey research answers. The result of focus group discussion is not only verbal information but also collection of immediate reactions, agreements or oppositions, shared experiences or exceptional cases as well as non-verbal flows of information that specific format of conversation can provide. For example, under research project "Youth Friendly Health Services" (conducted in 2004 for UNDP Lithuania, UNFPA, UNICEF with technical support from WHO) a focus group research was conducted with young people asking about their experiences with health service providers. A number of focus groups were conducted in different locations. However, after introducing a question about a particular type of services, in any group the same reaction used to come out—a burst of ironic comments, laughter, and some kind of shared excitement. This was much more valuable information than the verbal answer provided by focus group participants. Moreover, this kind of information would not have been collected if young people were interviewed individually. They would not feel it so easy to express true reaction to the question being on their own. Focus group usually aims at collecting opinions, attitudes, beliefs, judgements, experiences, needs, assessments, motives, etc. in relation to research topic.

What are the advantages of the focus group method? The interaction of participants during the focus group provides information that would not be obtained using individual interviews or survey research. Usually, focus groups are efficient in revealing covered, unexpected, or new information upon research questions (Ansary, Perkins and Nelson, 2004; Engel and Schutt, 2010; Rubin and Babbie, 2010). Focus groups are relevant when the researcher is looking for a range of ideas, aims at understanding

differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people, seeks to uncover factors that are behind opinions, motivation, or behaviour (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Repeating focus groups with different grouping makes it possible to identify trends and patterns in the responses (Krysiak and Finn, 2010). Focus group allows collecting rich information in a limited time period. A focus group involves 6 or more participants thus it leads to larger sample size in comparison to other qualitative methods (especially that a number of focus groups usually is used for a single research). Focus group provides with verbal and non-verbal information thus enhancing richness of data collected. Focus groups can be used both as a principle data source and in combination with other research methods (Morgan, 1997; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson, 2001). For example, focus groups are used prior to survey research to collect information needed for efficient construction of survey questionnaire. In other case, focus groups can be conducted in order to provide with more in-depth, contextualised examples complementing survey or other research findings.

However, there are also some disadvantages and difficulties with focus groups. It can be difficult to practically arrange focus group activity: researcher has to handle a group of people to attend discussion at a certain time; special room and environment is needed to host a group of people for discussion; data recording equipment is required to ensure completeness of data collected. Also, moderating focus group requires skills and experience. Moderator must be prepared to efficiently deal with variety of participants' reactions, dominance or passivity, potential conflicts or other unexpected outcomes. Also, group dynamics may create pressures for participants to say things that may not accurately reflect their feelings or needs (Rubin and Babbie, 2010). One more potential difficulty of focus group method relates to data analysis. Focus group produces extensive amount of qualitative data that is both time consuming to proceed and is susceptible for subjectivity of interpretation. Focus groups can provide with contradictory or inconsistent information especially when a number of focus groups is conducted.

In addition, at least few circumstances can be pointed out when focus groups should not be used. Focus groups are not appropriate for exploration of sensitive, complicated, controversial questions that are difficult to discuss in public. However, it must be noted that in social work context the borderline of "sensitive" topics is not definite because sensitivity may be inherent in this context (e.g., many simple questions may become sensitive when talking to homeless or other disadvantaged groups). There are suggestions that on the contrary, in social work context some people may be more willing to share sensitive information in supportive group environment (Linhorst, 2000).

Focus groups are not conducted in order to reach an agreement among participants. On the contrary, they are feasible for obtaining variety of perspectives. Focus group is a research method and should be used for research purposes, and not for educating, informing, or otherwise affecting participants' attitudes or knowledge. Also, focus groups should not be used when the group mix is not favourable for discussion because of being in some kind of power relationship (e.g. staff with clients) or when participants do not have adequate information or experience to address questions of a discussion (Linhorst, 2002).

2. Planning and organising focus group research

There are at least six practical issues that must be considered previous to focus group discussion: the role and skills of moderator; selection and invitation of focus group participants; preparing means for recording the information; planning time and place of discussion; and preparing focus group scenario.

The role of focus group moderator. Skilled moderator is one of the key elements for the success of focus group process and quality of information collected. It could probably be correct to suggest that it is moderator rather than questionnaire who is the main tool for collecting information through focus group method. Moderator plays several functions. First, he/she is responsible for keeping the discussion focused on the research topic. Though focus group is a rather flexible type of interview at the same time it should not detour too much from the central topic of the research. Second, moderator shall follow the distribution of activity among focus group participants ensuring that each will have similar level of involvement into discussion. It is a common characteristic of any kind of group that usually there are people who take active or dominant position whereas others mostly remain silent. It is moderator's task to collect information with input from every participant of the focus group. Finally, moderator has to foster discussion. As it has been mentioned above, focus group is a special type of interview. The main task of moderator is not simply give questions in a predetermined sequence but make the discussion environment favourable for unrestrained interaction, generating multifaceted discussion.

When conducting focus group discussion in social work practice a question may arise: shall there be a professional moderator invited or a moderator from "inside" (e.g. a social worker in an organisation) can take the role of moderator? There are two questions crucial for selection of moderator: if he/she is skilled enough to control group process; and if his/her position in relation to group participants is favourable for "open-up" discussion? The latter will be highly dependent on discussion topic: sometimes a complete stranger would work well to have unrestrained discussion whereas in other cases a familiar person will help participants to feel more comfortable. The social work research practice shows that social work context may demand to adjust focus group leadership skills to the possible specific needs of focus group participants and professional moderator is not always a required or best solution (Cohen and Garrett, 1999; Fern, 2001). Cohen and Garrett (1999) argue that general guidelines for focus group moderator (or presence of professional moderator) can lead to rigidity from the part of moderator thus disregarding concerns or feeling of participants and potentially losing possibility for greater depth of the data collected. Their experience is based on qualitative research of client/worker relationships in residential mental health setting. The authors suggest that conducting focus groups in social work context moderators should reasonably combine guidelines from research methods with knowledge, values and goals of social work practices: "it may be appropriate to change roles from data gatherer to helper, support person or mediator, in order to assist a member [of focus group discussion]" (Cohen and Garrett, 1999, p. 370).

In any case, group moderator shall be aware and follow the main principles of research ethics as it is of extreme importance in social work research (having in mind that very often research participants are at the same time clients of social work services and it means vulnerable or dependant categories of people) (Linhorst, 2002; Krysik and Finn, 2010; Rubbin amd Babbie, 2010). Being neutral, non-judgemental, attentive and respectful with any type of participants, avoiding criticism and debating with participants—these are few recommendations for moderators who are willing to collect necessary quality of information.

Group moderator takes active position of discussion guide and it is really involving position. Therefore, whenever possible it is useful to have **assistant of group moderator**. The role of assistant is additional record of the main points of the discussion and observation of non-verbal information; making notes of possible follow-up or additional questions; following operation of information record equipment and provision of other help needed for moderator.

Selection of focus group participants. The feasible number of focus group participants ranges around 6 and 12 people in one focus group. This number refers to attendants. Therefore, previous to actual discussion researcher must consider that some of possible participants may not actually appear. Good practice could be to agree with a maximum number of participants in order to be sure that at least minimum required number will actually participate.

It must be noted than in literature proposed optimal number of focus group participants may differ (however, usually suggestions fall in between 5 and 15). The number of participants is defined in compliance with group dynamics—few participants are not enough for the evolvement of discussion; too many are difficult to manage. Also, as Krueger and Casey (2000) point out, “the group must be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide the diversity of perceptions” (p.10).

Usually, for the purposes of one research more than one focus group is conducted. Again, the recommended scope could be from several to 20 or even more focus groups. This is not related to quantitative generalisation as neither one focus group nor sample of focus groups is selected in terms of making it representative. Selection of participants and number of focus groups relates to consistency of findings and coherence of conclusion. Sampling approaches proposed for qualitative research should be used when deciding upon extent of focus group research.

There are though several considerations specific for a focus group formation. Participants in one focus group must have a shared characteristic in relation to research topic. For example, if research concerns with client satisfaction with a certain service, current users of the service can be invited. If the topic explores shortcomings of some intervention programme, a focus group can be conducted with those who withdraw from the programme.

Based on the aims of a study researcher can also decide upon forming a more homogenous or heterogeneous group. Group dynamics suggests that homogeneity may create easiness to open up in discussion whereas heterogeneity may foster variety of ideas (Fern, 2001). In any case, composition of a certain focus group must be

conductive for smooth focused discussion where each participant is of equal value in comparison to other participants.

One more issue related to selection of group participants is their familiarity with each other. Coming from marketing and consumer research, common suggestion is that participants do not know each other prior to meeting in a discussion. Lately, the necessity and practicality of this guideline had come into questions, especially when focus groups expanded into different research areas (Krueger and Casey, 2000). In relation to social work research environment there are cases when participants are inevitably familiar (e.g. clients using service under same organisational setting), or when a priori familiarity is beneficial for research purposes (Cohen and Garrett, 1999).

When a number of focus groups are involved in a research the composition of each group also depends on research purpose. All focus groups in a research can be of similar compositions or they can be selected on basis of differences. For example, male and female focus groups; group of those who have just started using day care centre services and those who have been using them for a while.

Recording information. It is commonly recommended that whenever possible voice/video recording equipment should be used for data recording in focus group research. Also, recorded information must be thoroughly transcribed including both verbal and non-verbal contents. This is related to quality requirements for qualitative data. First, it allows fulfilling requirement of descriptive validity and coherence (Johnson, 1997; Flick, 2007) in qualitative research data. Second, it safeguards losing important information (what is common when only making written notes during focus group interview). Sometimes it is suggested that notes can be taken if recording is not possible. However, in such a case it could be reasonable to think about other methods of data collection. Trying to make notes in an interview with group of people is very unfavourable for quality of data collected. Generally, qualitative research approach states that what is important and what is not important can be truly defined only after data collection process is completed. In this case, only after all focus groups in a research are conducted.

Often the focus is placed on verbal information provided by participants of focus group. However, one of elements of focus group process is observation of non-verbal information, for example, common expressions of reaction of group participants; long silence after presenting a question; mimics of group participants, etc. Non-verbal signs are sometimes even more informative than verbal flows in a group. If only voice record is used, non-verbal communication should be followed and noted by moderator or assistant of moderator.

All participants shall be in advance informed about use of record equipment. They shall receive explanation that it is purely related to attempts to avoid distortion in information provided by them and assure that records will be kept anonymous and confidential only for the purposes of research. It is common for any qualitative research that using recording techniques may have effect on behaviour of participants. However, this effect tends to diminish or disappear in the course of focus group discussion as participant get used to it and stop noticing it. This must be kept in mind when preparing focus group scenario. Focus group should start from introductory phase and only later focus on main discussion.

Time and place of focus group. Average time of focus group discussion takes about 1.5 hour. Duration of focus group is defined in terms of efficiency of conversation. If focus group exceeds 2 hours participants (and possibly moderator) tend to become less attentive, involved and focused. This must be considered when defining discussion topic and preparing focus group scenario. Possible suggestion is to limit focus group discussion to 7-12 predetermined main questions (Krysik and Finn, 2010). Researcher shall inform participants in advance about duration of a focus group. Actual discussion should fall in predetermined time line; otherwise, participants tend to become anxious about unexpectedly extended discussion. Therefore, it is a good practice to have a well-grounded assessment of duration of forward focus group or groups. Assessment could be based on practice of previous research or a pilot focus group.

One of difficulties in focus group planning is setting date and time suitable for potential focus group participants. Researcher shall coordinate the possibility of group of people to appear at the same time for the discussion. Also, to assure that the location of group discussion is comfortable for the participants and will not affect negatively their willingness to participate.

There are several requirements related to the room of focus group. Preferable form for seating participants is a circle. Thus, researcher shall think about possibility to have a room allowing such way of seating. Also, room is very important in terms of quality of data recording. Whenever it is possible, room should be in a quite environment. A very practical remark: it is always useful to check acoustics of a particular room in advance because it often happens that the room itself creates noise in voice and/or video recorder. It makes it very difficult then to transcribe the data.

Preparing setting for focus group discussion placement of data recording equipment must be foreseen. As it was indicated above, continuous voice and/or video recording is recommended form for information collection. Voice and/or video recorder should be placed to provide the best quality of record. This is, again, important both for quality of data (ensuring as full record as possible) and easiness of transcription process. Any inferences have negative influence on data quality. For example, it might be difficult or impossible to hear/understand some parts of discussion; some participants may be recorded very well while statements of other participants (e.g. those who sit far from recording equipment) may be partly or even fully unrecorded. Though these comments might be considered as self-evident, the author's practice shows that failure to handle data recording techniques is rather frequent cause of disrupted continuity and quality of data collected in focus group.

3. Focus group scenario: suggested framework

The leading topics and corresponding questions for focus group discussion are prepared in advance. The questionnaire of focus group is rather a focus group scenario including not only the main discussion topics (questions) but also thoughtfully predetermined sequence of questions and course of the discussion.

The table below summarises the main steps of focus group scenario and provides with practical hints for efficient practice of moderator. Based on author's experience of what is important and works efficiently, it can serve as base framework when planning to conduct a focus group.

Table 1. Focus group process framework.

<p>Step 1</p> <p>Introduction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of moderator (and assistant); greeting of participants. • Introduction of research purposes. • Explanation of research ethics and need to use recording equipment. • Presentation and agreement upon discussion rules. Moderator shall assure that each member of group discussion is important and respected. Moderator proposes how equal and orderly participation of everyone can be reached (e.g., one speaker at a time; no rude interruption, etc.). Also, participants may suggest their rules to enhance focus group participation.
<p>Step 2</p> <p>Getting used to group discussion environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going straight to the main topics of discussion may result in vague input of participants for some time. It is reasonable to devote at least few minutes to get used to focus group environment. Some very helpful practices: asking each participant to introduce with a bit of simple personal of information related to discussion topic. • This step also helps to diminish reaction to recording techniques.
<p>Step 3</p> <p>Discussion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group interview process follows the same rules as any other qualitative interview: it starts with general question or questions and gradually moves to the main and more specific questions of discussion. • Wording and forms of questions must be discussion-oriented: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderator should avoid “yes” or “no” questions. If not possible, moderator should try to develop answer by follow-up questions. - Moderator should be patient. Participant might not be able to answer immediately to any question. Only after prolonged silences attempts to paraphrase a question shall be made. Otherwise, participants might feel interrupted and restrain from their answer. This item should be considered seriously if focus group discussion is conducted with possibly vulnerable groups in social work context. - Moderator should notice mostly silent participants and encourage them to express their opinions or experiences. Referential questions are suitable for that: “John has just mentioned that the reason why he avoids is that ... Jane (referring to a silent participant), what is you experience with that?”. - Referring to the past can also enhance involvement into discussion: “Please, remember the last time that you had this type of treatment. How did it go?” - Various follow-up or clarifying questions are useful: “Could you please give an example of that?”; “How did you feel about that?”; “Did you mean...”; and similar. - Hypothetical questions can be used efficiently: “If you were responsible for the program what would be the first thing for improvement?”.
<p>Step 4</p> <p>Summary of discussion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is recommended to end up discussion with a summary of it, asking participants to add up their last input into discussion or express any ideas that have been omitted but are important to them.

Though some literature suggests that focus groups can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, in reality the degree of formal structure in a focus group depends mainly on researcher's perception of research goals, research setting and reaction of participant to the research topic (Morgan, 1997). Thus in practice it is reasonable to construct a semi-structured focus group guide while at the same time being prepared for possible deviation in formality and structure of the discussion. Also, it is important to consider advantages and disadvantages of structure of focus group. On the one hand, more structured course of the discussion allows remaining focused on research topic and allows more comprehensive analysis, especially when numerous focus groups are conducted. On the other hand, less structured discussion is favourable for acquiring divers, unpredicted, meaningful aspects on research topic; though it can be difficult to analyse and make compatible data collected in unstructured focus groups.

CONCLUSIONS

As the article reveals, there is wide range of situations and topics where focus groups can be used in social work research. A decision about applicability of focus group to a specific research question depends on the compatibility of method requirements with needs and resources of researcher, type and scope of research question, type of potential focus group participants as well as a number of issues related to arrangements of focus group research. The aims and values of social work practice influence both focus group process and outcomes that application of focus group research can bring.

The article was limited to the main issues of use of focus groups in social work research. The general guideline for successful application of this method is to be aware of alternative decisions and their outcomes to be able to choose the best possible solution in a particular research case. It has been demonstrated that social work practitioners shall combine the knowledge in social research methods with the knowledge of social work practice.

It is very important to keep in mind that social workers often deal with topics, situations and target groups which might require variation from standard recommendations for focus group research process and environment. Social work researchers' experiences with focus groups research tend to enhance applicability of the method as well as provide with knowledge needed for social work practice.

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FOCUS GRUPĖS METODO TAIKYMAS SOCIALINIO DARBO TYRIMUOSE

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamos focus grupės metodo taikymo socialinio darbo tyrimuose galimybės. Šis metodas, jau ilgai taikomas marketingo ir vartotojų tyrimuose, paskutiniaisiais dešimtmečiais plačiai taikomas ir įvairiose socialinių mokslų srityse, pavyzdžiui, sociologijoje ar socialiniame darbe. Focus grupė – tai kokybinis interviu-diskusija su grupe tikslingai atrinktų tyrimo dalyvių. Focus grupės išsiskiria tuo, kad jų metu fiksuojama ne tik žodinė informacija, tačiau labai svarbus informacijos šaltinis yra dalyvių tarpusavio sąveika diskusijos metu. Focus grupės diskusijos atliekamos laikantis bendrųjų metodologinių ir metodinių taisyklių. Tačiau jų taikymas socialinio darbo praktikoje atskleidžia, kad specifinė tyrimo aplinka gali lemti ir šių taisyklių koregavimą ar keitimą. Remiantis autorės tiriamosios veiklos patirtimi bei bendraisiais focus grupių atlikimo principais, atskleidžiama, kokie socialinio darbo veiklos tikslai ir vertybės gali turėti įtakos focus grupių specifikai. Socialinio darbo tyrimų tikslai dažniau yra taikomieji, neretai susiję su pažeidžiamomis tikslinėmis grupėmis, informacija renkama tiesioginėje socialinio darbo praktikos aplinkoje. Todėl planuojant ir atliekant šiuos tyrimus, svarbu atsižvelgti į galimus tyrimo dalyvių savitumus, įvertinti diskusijos temos tinkamumą, apsvarstyti galimus sunkumus moderuojant focus grupės diskusiją socia-

linio darbo kontekste. Straipsnyje pateikiamos į praktinius tiriamosios veiklos aspektus orientuotos rekomendacijos, apimančios focus grupės moderatoriaus funkcijas, focus grupės dalyvių atranką, focus grupės aplinkos parametrus bei duomenų fiksavimo reikalavimus. Straipsnyje siūlomas pavyzdinis focus grupės scenarijaus planas, apimantis tiek pagrindinius focus grupės diskusijos eigos žingsnius, tiek naudingas rekomendacijas focus grupės moderatoriumi.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kokybinis tyrimas, focus grupė, socialinio darbo tyrimas.