

EDITORIAL FORWARD

Focus Group Discussions in Qualitative Research

The Journal of Agricultural Sciences – Sri Lanka receives a large number of manuscripts to be considered for publication. We realize that the majority of them are from the areas of crop science, livestock production, and allied fields that have used experiments as the research strategy. The minority that falls into the areas such as agribusiness, agricultural economics, and agricultural extension have used surveys and other qualitative strategies. There is a noticeable lack in utilizing other qualitative research strategies in current research. Therefore, the objective of this editorial is to promote the focus group discussion (FGD) as a qualitative methodology.

The Introduction to Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussions are a qualitative research method that gathers diverse perspectives from participants through guided group interactions. This method is particularly valuable for exploring complex behaviors, attitudes, and experiences, making it an effective tool in social sciences, market research, and health studies (Bryman 2023). FGDs provide rich, detailed data by facilitating a dynamic exchange of ideas among participants, allowing researchers to capture the depth and nuances of human interactions. According to Patton (2022), FGDs are instrumental in uncovering the underlying motivations behind individuals' opinions and behaviors, which might not emerge in individual interviews. Additionally, the group setting encourages participants to engage with each other's viewpoints, leading to a more constructive and comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied (Smith 2021). As qualitative research continues to evolve, FGDs remain a popular choice for researchers seeking to delve into the complexities of human thought and behavior, providing insights that quantitative methods might overlook.

The Focus Group Discussion as a Data Collection Tool

Focus group discussions serve as a powerful data collection tool in qualitative research, enabling the exploration of complex social phenomena through interactive group settings. Unlike surveys or individual interviews, FGDs allow researchers to observe group dynamics, capture a wide range of perspectives, and identify collective sentiments (Morgan 2021). This method is particularly effective when the research goal is to explore participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences in a nuanced manner. The interaction within a group often stimulates participants to express ideas they might not share in a one-on-one setting, leading to the generation of richer data (Krueger and Casey 2022). Furthermore, FGDs can reveal the social context that shapes individual responses, providing insights into how group norms and interactions influence participants' opinions (Gibbs 2018). However, the effectiveness of FGDs as a data collection tool depends on careful planning, including the selection of a skilled moderator, the composition of the group, and the formulation of open-ended questions that encourage discussion (Litosseliti 2019). Despite some limitations, such as potential groupthink or dominance by certain participants, FGDs remain a valuable method for collecting in-depth qualitative data in various research settings.

The Relevance of Focus Group Discussion in Qualitative Research

Focus group discussions (FGDs) hold significant relevance in qualitative research due to their ability to elicit rich, contextualized data through interactive group dynamics. Unlike other qualitative methods, FGDs allow researchers to explore the collective construction of meaning among participants, revealing the shared and contested understandings within a group (Kitzinger 2020). This method is particularly valuable in studies that seek to understand the social processes and cultural norms that influence individual behaviors and attitudes. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), FGDs are effective in capturing the complexity of human experiences, as the group setting encourages participants to reflect on and refine their views in response to others' contributions. Moreover, FGDs provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, especially in research focused on sensitive or under-explored topics (Barbour 2018). The group interaction can foster a sense of harmony among participants, leading

to more candid discussions that might not emerge in individual interviews. Additionally, FGDs are adaptable and can be used in various research contexts, from exploring consumer preferences to examining community health issues (Bloor *et al.* 2022). Their relevance in qualitative research lies in their capacity to generate deep insights into complex social phenomena through collective dialogue.

Conducting a Focus Group Discussion in Qualitative Research

Conducting a focus group discussion (FGD) in qualitative research involves a strategic approach to gathering in-depth insights from a group of participants. The process begins with selecting a suitable group, typically composed of 6 to 12 individuals who share relevant characteristics or experiences related to the research topic (Krueger and Casey 2022). A skilled moderator plays a crucial role in guiding the discussion, using open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue while ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to contribute (Morgan 2021). The moderator's ability to manage group dynamics, such as preventing dominant voices from overshadowing others, is key to the success of the outcome of the FGD.

The setting for the FGD should be comfortable and conducive to open communication, with minimal distractions (Litosseliti 2019). Sessions are usually recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture for subsequent analysis. The discussion is typically structured around a topic guide, which outlines the key themes and questions to be explored while allowing flexibility for emergent topics (Gibbs 2018). The richness of data obtained from FGDs depends on the interaction among participants, making it a valuable method for understanding collective viewpoints and uncovering deeper insights in qualitative research.

Merits of Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions (FGDs) offer several merits as a qualitative research method, particularly in capturing diverse perspectives and fostering rich, interactive data collection. One key advantage is the ability to explore complex social dynamics, as participants engage with each other's ideas, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the research topic (Kitzinger 2020). FGDs are also efficient, enabling researchers to gather data from multiple participants simultaneously, which can save time and resources compared to individual interviews (Morgan 2021). Moreover, FGDs are flexible and can be adapted to various research contexts, from exploring consumer behavior to understanding social dynamics (Barbour 2018). The group setting often encourages participants to express views they might not share in a one-on-one context, leading to the discovery of deeper insights and unanticipated themes (Krueger and Casey 2022). These merits make FGDs a valuable tool in qualitative research.

Demerits of Focus Group Discussions

While focus group discussions (FGDs) are a valuable qualitative research tool, they have several demerits. One primary limitation is the potential for groupthink, where dominant participants may influence others, leading to a consensus that does not fully represent individual perspectives (Gibbs 2018). This dynamic can skew the data, making it less reflective of diverse viewpoints, thereby rendering conclusions to be flawed. Additionally, FGDs can be challenging to manage, particularly in maintaining a balanced discussion where all participants contribute equally (Barbour 2018). The presence of a moderator is crucial, but their influence might inadvertently steer the conversation, introducing bias (Litosseliti 2019). Furthermore, the data generated from FGDs can be complex and resource-consuming to analyze due to the interactive nature of the discussions (Morgan 2021). These challenges highlight the need for careful planning and skilled moderation when using FGDs as a research method.

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Editor-In-Chief
30th August 2024
<https://doi.org/10.4038/jas.v19i3.11085>

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