

THE USE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Natasha ANGELOSKA

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

E-mail: natasa@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

ORCID: 0000-0002-9048-5851

Elena GALEVSKA

University of Ljubljana

E-mail: elena.galevska@ef.uni-lj.si

ORCID: 0000-0001-8285-9406

Introduction

Modern sciences are constantly developing and looking for new ways to explore complex social reality. In this context, research methodology plays a key role, since the quality of the results and their scientific validity depend on the choice of appropriate methods and techniques. Social research relies on quantitative methods, such as surveys, tests and statistical analyses, which offer significant information, but do not always manage to present the full picture of the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of the respondents. Therefore, in recent decades, there has been an increasing recognition of the need to employ qualitative methods that enable a deeper exploration of the subjective dimensions of social phenomena. Among the most significant techniques within this approach are focus groups.

Focus groups are a research technique that is based on an organized discussion among a small group of people, led by a moderator, in order to discover their views, opinions, values, and experiences regarding a specific topic. This interactive form of discussion facilitates the collection of data of greater depth and richness compared to those derived from standardized questionnaires or individual interviews. In addition to collecting information, focus groups create an environment in which participants complement each other, debate, and discover new ideas that would not normally arise in individual conversations.

The importance of focus groups lies also in their flexibility and adaptability to various social contexts. They can be used to examine the attitudes of respondents to certain phenomena, to analyze the effectiveness of certain methods and strategies, to investigate the problems faced by practitioners, or to obtain feedback. The data collected serves not only for scientific analysis,

but also for the practical improvement of social practice and the creation of new policies.

Although focus groups are among the most popular qualitative techniques in the social sciences, their use in social research is still quite limited and not sufficiently systematized. This raises important questions: To what extent can focus groups be an effective technique for obtaining valid and relevant data in social research?

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance, characteristics and application of focus groups in social research, as well as to point out their advantages and limitations in comparison with other research techniques. The significance of this topic arises from the need to analyze and confirm the role of focus groups as a valid methodological instrument in the social sciences. This includes dilemmas related to the advantages and limitations of the technique, the way of organizing and moderating the groups, as well as the question of what knowledge can be obtained through them in comparison with other research methods.

1. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE APPROACH IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Modern research relies on different research paradigms that provide a deeper understanding of complex social processes. Two fundamental approaches are most commonly distinguished in social research: the quantitative and the qualitative. The quantitative approach is based on the application of methods that enable the measurement, comparison, and statistical analysis of data. The main goal of this approach is to obtain objective, precise and generalized results that can be applied in a broader educational context.

In quantitative studies, one uses theory deductively and places it toward the beginning of the proposal for a study. "With the objective of testing or verifying a theory rather than developing it, the researcher advances a theory, collects data to test it, and reflects on its confirmation or disconfirmation by the results." (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 64) The main advantage of the quantitative approach is its ability to provide data that is measurable, verifiable, and representative. It allows researchers to draw general conclusions and formulate models that apply to a large number of cases. However, its disadvantage is its limited ability to delve into the deeper meanings, motives, and individual experiences of participants in the educational process.

The qualitative approach, unlike the quantitative one, focuses on a deeper understanding of phenomena through the analysis of the experiences, perceptions and meanings brought by the participants. Its main goal is to show the complexity of the educational reality, and not just to measure its aspects. Qualitative research uses less structured data, emphasizes the central place of subjectivity in the research process and studies 'a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail' using verbal rather than statistical analysis (Hammersley, 2013, p. 12).

The advantage of the qualitative approach is its ability to reveal new perspectives and offer deeper insights that often remain inaccessible to quantitative methods. It allows flexibility in the research process and adaptation of the methodology to the specificities of the environment. However, the limitations of this approach are related to the lower possibility of generalizing the results, as well as the greater subjectivity in their interpretation (Angeloska-Galevska, 1998).

2. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

Qualitative research is a key way to gain an in-depth understanding of social processes, as it focuses on the meanings, experiences and perspectives of participants. Unlike the quantitative approach, which strives for measurement and generalization, the qualitative method allows for the interpretation of individual and group experiences in a specific social and cultural context. Due to the complexity of education, qualitative techniques are becoming increasingly important in contemporary social sciences, as they reveal aspects that often remain hidden behind numbers and statistics.

2.1. Differences between qualitative and quantitative techniques

Research in the social sciences is based on two basic methodological approaches – quantitative and qualitative. Although both are used to study social processes, there are significant differences in their philosophical foundations, goals, techniques for collecting and analyzing data, and the nature of the results. Understanding these differences is crucial for any researcher, as the choice of methodological approach can affect the validity, relevance, and applicability of the results obtained.

The quantitative approach is based on the idea that social phenomena can be measured and expressed through numbers, which allows for their statistical processing. This method strives for objectivity and precision, and its main goal is to test certain hypotheses and discover patterns or cause-and-effect relationships between variables. The results are expressed through statistical indicators and can be generalized to a wider population. Data in this approach is most often collected through surveys, tests or experiments, and their analysis is carried out using statistical techniques.

On the other hand, the qualitative approach emphasizes the individual perspective, meanings, and experiences of participants in the educational process. Its goal is an in-depth understanding of phenomena and the context in which they occur, rather than focusing on measurement or generalization.

Within this approach, the respondent is not just a source of data, but an active participant whose personal perspectives play a key role in the interpretation. For example, while quantitative research can provide us with information such as the grade point average, qualitative research can focus on how students experience the learning process, what attitudes and emotions they have about learning, or what strategies they use to master a particular content. Data is collected through focus groups, interviews, observations, or document

analysis, and its processing is based on interpretation, categorization, and thematic analysis, with the researcher playing an active and interpretive role.

The main difference between the two approaches lies in the nature of the data and the type of conclusions we draw. The quantitative approach offers numerical indicators that help us test hypotheses and generalize results, while the qualitative approach allows us to delve into the depth of individual experiences and contexts, without trying to apply them to a broader plan. In other words, quantitative research focuses on the questions of “how much” and “to what extent”, while qualitative research deals with the “how” and “why”.

Although they are often seen as two opposing methodological models, in modern social sciences they are actually considered complementary. The quantitative approach offers certainty in numbers and the possibility of comparisons, while the qualitative approach brings greater sensitivity to human experiences and the social context. Therefore, a combined approach or the so-called methodological triangulation is increasingly being applied, which integrates the advantages of both methodological directions and allows for a more complete, greater scientific reliability of the results and a richer analysis of educational phenomena (Angeloska-Galevska, N., Iliev, D., 2018).

2.2. Use and advantages of qualitative techniques in social research

Qualitative techniques in social research are crucial because they enable an in-depth understanding of the phenomena being researched. Social sciences cannot always rely only on quantitative data and statistical indicators. Social processes are complex and deeply connected with human experiences, attitudes and values. Therefore, qualitative research is an indispensable tool for understanding how participants experience social practices and interactions.

Qualitative research uses less structured data, emphasizes the central place of subjectivity in the research process and studies ‘a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail’ using verbal rather than statistical analysis (Hammersley, 2013, p. 12). The use of qualitative techniques is usually associated with research that aims to discover and interpret the meaning of certain experiences. For instance, by conducting interviews with employees, researchers can gain insight into how they perceive workplace communication, what challenges they face in collaborating with colleagues, and what approaches they use to overcome these difficulties. Observation as a technique allows the researcher to directly monitor the group dynamics. Focus groups, on the other hand, allow for the analysis of group interaction and the way in which attitudes and opinions are formed within the collective context.

One of the greatest advantages of qualitative techniques is their flexibility and ability to adapt to the specific environment and research problem. Unlike quantitative methods, which require strictly structured instruments and pre-determined hypotheses and variables, qualitative techniques allow the phenomenon under study to be observed in its natural and authentic form, without strictly limited categories (Newman, 2009). This helps the researcher to

understand the complexity of social processes and to arrive at deeper insights that would otherwise remain hidden behind numbers and statistical indicators.

An additional advantage of the qualitative approach is that it emphasizes the role of participants as active collaborators in the research process. Rather than being viewed as "objects of measurement," they are treated as subjects with their own experiences, voices, and interpretations of reality. This approach strengthens the validity of the data, as the results emerge directly from the experiences and perceptions of those most directly involved in the educational process.

On a practical level, these techniques help to understand the broader social and cultural context in which the educational process takes place, which is especially important for multicultural societies (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K., 2018). Another example of their use would be pedagogy. In this field, qualitative research significantly contributes to the development of more effective educational strategies and policies. If qualitative research reveals that students feel insufficiently supported by teachers in the learning process, this knowledge can serve as a basis for creating programs for the professional development of teachers and for improving communication in education.

In short, qualitative techniques in social research allow the researcher to enter the "inner perspective" of reality, to perceive its hidden dimensions and to offer interpretations that are close to the everyday experience of the participants. Their value is not measured in numerical precision, but in the richness and depth of the insights they offer, which represent an irreplaceable contribution to the advancement of social theory and practice.

3. FOCUS GROUPS AS A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE

Over the past five decades, focus groups have become a widely used research tool in various fields of human activity. Although their role, along with participatory observation and interviewing, is considered fundamental in generating qualitative data, as a research technique, they did not gain wider application until the Second World War, when they became an equal research technique with others in the methodology of the social sciences. The diversity of research objectives, theories and procedures that characterize the social sciences shows that the focus group is applied differently in different fields, which demonstrates its flexibility and effectiveness as a research technique. Focus groups find wide application in practice, for example, to gain insight into the opinions of voters in election campaigns, for political analysis and solutions, to determine how consumers react to a new product, to discover what employees think about the atmosphere and interpersonal relations in the work team, etc. Nowadays, focus groups are recognized as a core qualitative technique across disciplines, including sociology, education, health studies, and policy research, valued for their ability to capture the complexity of social meanings through group interaction (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In the following text, we critically examine the key components of the implementation of focus groups as a research technique. In doing so, the paper

provides a nuanced and multifaceted insight into the theoretical foundations of the focus group in order to enable a clearer understanding of this technique.

3.1. Definition and characteristics

Focus groups, as a research technique, generally refer to a small group of participants convened for research purposes to discuss issues related to a specific topic. Conventionally, the technique is characterized by a debate that takes place in the presence of a moderator and an observer, who notes and collects verbal and nonverbal information arising from the interaction and integrates verbal information arising from the conversation.

As a scientific research technique, focus groups are special groups of individuals selected by the researcher and brought together in one place to discuss and comment on the subject of the research through the prism of their own experience. In other words, focus groups are based on the interaction between the participants in the group regarding the topic that is the subject of the research (Barbour, R., & Kitzinger, J., 1998).

Morgan (1997) defines a focus group as a group interview focused on a specific topic, facilitated and coordinated by a moderator or facilitator, which aims to generate primarily qualitative data by taking advantage of the interaction that occurs in the group environment.

In general, a focus group refers to a small group of individuals, said to “number between six and twelve people, who meet to express their views on a specific topic defined by the researcher.” (Angeloska-Galevska, 2024). In the history of behavioral research, the focus group is considered a key technique that involves exploring concepts and understanding what people say.

Although such feelings and opinions may exist independently of the group, the interaction between focus group participants can help uncover these. On the one hand, people become more aware of their own views and more willing to analyze them when confronted with the views of others; however, on the other hand, the group context can modify or suppress individuals' original views (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K., 2018). Nevertheless, focus groups do not elicit the opinions and feelings of individuals as are typically revealed through individual interviews – focus groups bring to the surface the differences in opinions that exist between individuals in a group context.

Hence, focus groups resemble a group interview and a group discussion. The similarity with a group interview is seen from the moderator asking more or less predefined questions to the group. Yet, differences exist, as the respondent in the interview is only answering the questions asked by the interviewer, while the respondent of a focus group has **an active** role as a participant in a discussion about the questions asked, and the answers are obtained through an exchange of opinions with other members of the group. Moreover, focus groups are not intended as forums for exchanging opinions for their own sake, nor are they designed to achieve consensus among participants. The purpose of the discussion in focus groups is to elicit responses to the research questions posed.

Focus groups differ from ordinary groups of people gathered to discuss a particular topic not only in their purpose, composition, and size, but also in the data collection procedure. Focus group research involves a series of discussions led by a specially trained moderator in an atmosphere that is perceived as safe for respondents to express their opinions and feelings.

The questions posed by the moderator are prepared in advance and carefully planned to focus the discussion on the topic, but also to stimulate the discovery of differences in the views of the respondents. Each focus group participating in the series of discussions is made up of a small number of respondents, specially selected according to some common characteristics.

3.2. History and development

Focus groups, as a research method, have an interesting history dating back to the mid-20th century and are closely associated with the social sciences, especially sociology and psychology. The earliest examples of focus group discussions appear during the Second World War, when American sociologists and psychologists, notably Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, began to apply these techniques to investigate the influence of radio and other media on public opinion (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956). They realized that individual interviews could not always reveal the full dynamics of attitudes and perceptions, so they developed a method in which multiple participants discuss a particular topic while the researcher carefully observes their behavior and the way their opinions are formed.

This approach was originally known as "group interviews" and was used mainly to examine the effects of propaganda, as well as to understand social reactions to various media messages. After the war, focus groups began to be applied to a greater extent in the field of market research. Companies recognized them as a useful technique for studying consumer habits and preferences, since group discussion allows for insight not only into individual attitudes, but also into the process of their formation under the influence of social interaction.

During the 1960s and 1970s, focus groups began to develop as a distinct methodological technique and gradually entered academic research. Sociologists and educators used them to examine cultural and educational differences in different communities, while psychologists applied them to gain deeper insights into the motivations, attitudes, and emotions of individuals.

The rise of qualitative research in the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s led to a new wave of interest in focus groups. They were used as a method that not only allowed for data collection, but also helped to understand the complex processes of communication, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning within group interaction. Researchers increasingly appreciated their advantage, since they can reflect the real social conditions in which people naturally form their views and opinions.

In the modern period, focus groups have become one of the most popular qualitative techniques, applicable in a wide range of disciplines – from marketing

and political science, to education, health and public policy. In pedagogy, their role is especially important, as they allow the “voice” of students, teachers or parents to be heard in the context of educational changes. With their help, researchers can identify the needs and problems of participants in the educational process, but also understand how they collectively interpret them.

3.3. Advantages and limitations

Focus groups are considered one of the most flexible and useful qualitative techniques, and Allen Bryman (2016) points to several key advantages that make this method attractive to researchers in the social and human sciences. One of the most significant advantages is that focus groups allow for the generation of data through group interaction. Unlike individual interviews, participants not only answer the moderator’s questions, but also communicate with each other, complement each other, debate and share experiences. Such interactivity allows for deeper and richer data to be obtained, which reveals the dynamics of attitudes and the process of their formation.

An additional advantage, according to Bryman, is that focus groups are particularly useful for exploring sensitive or complex topics, where an individual interview can create pressure on the participant. In a group context, participants feel more encouraged to share their views because they see that others have similar experiences or opinions. This is especially important in social research, where teachers, students, or parents often face similar challenges and discussing them together creates a sense of validity and acceptance.

Among other benefits, this technique stands out for its cost-effectiveness and efficiency. With relatively little time and resources, the researcher can collect information from multiple participants simultaneously. Instead of conducting dozens of individual interviews, a focus group allows for the collection of research data from multiple participants in a single, organized conversation.

However, Silverman (2021) points out that, despite their advantages, focus groups also have their limitations. One of them is the difficulty in controlling group dynamics. There is often a risk that some participants will dominate the discussion, while others remain passive. This can lead to skewed results, as the loudest opinions are more pronounced than those of quieter members.

Additionally, from a methodological perspective, focus groups are often criticized for the difficulty of analyzing the data. Discussions generate a large amount of material that includes not only verbal statements, but also nonverbal communication, mutual reactions, and emotions. All of this requires careful and complex processing, which can be more laborious compared to other methods.

According to Bryman (2016), focus groups are characterized by limited generalizability. Because they involve a small and specifically selected group of participants, the results cannot always be generalized to the wider population. Therefore, they are most often used to gain in- depth insight and generate hypotheses, rather than for statistical generalization.

Advantages of focus groups lie in their ability to provide rich, interactive and authentic insight into people's views and experiences, while the limitations are related to group dynamics, data analysis and generalization of results.

This balance between strengths and weaknesses confirms the need for researchers to carefully consider the appropriateness of this technique depending on the goals and context of the social research.

Another significant challenge is the issue of confidentiality and honesty. Although the group context can encourage openness, there is also a risk that some participants will refrain from expressing themselves honestly, especially if the topic is sensitive or if hierarchical relationships exist within the group (for example, employees and their superiors). The advantages and limitations of focus groups are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Advantages and limitations of focus groups*

Advantages	Limitations
Generates data through group interaction, leading to deeper and richer information	Group dynamics are difficult to control; some participants may dominate the conversation
Encourages sharing of opinions on sensitive and complex topics in a supportive context	Risk of lack of honesty, especially if the topic is sensitive or there is a hierarchy among the participants
Economical and efficient technique (allows data collection from multiple participants simultaneously)	Data analysis is complex due to the large amount of material and nonverbal aspects.
Provides authentic and collectively constructed views	Limited generalizability; results apply to the group, but not to the wider population

3.4. Key elements: selection of participants, role of the moderator, structure of the discussion

Focus groups, as a research method, require careful preparation and organization. Three key elements: the selection of participants, the role of the moderator, and the structure of the discussion, are essential for the validity and success of the data obtained.

3.4.1. Selection of participants

The selection of participants is a key component for the quality of the discussion and the relevance of the results obtained from the focus groups. Participants should not be selected randomly, but carefully, according to criteria that are related to the research problem and the objectives of the study. Typically, individuals who are rich in information are selected as respondents in focus groups, that is, individuals from whom much can be learned about the issues that are the subject of the research. Therefore, the starting criterion for selecting respondents is their experience and knowledge regarding the subject of the research (Emmel, 2013).

In order to cover all perspectives related to the subject of the research, the research should include members of subgroups who have knowledge and experience on different aspects of the research questions. However, whenever the subgroups differ in some pivotal characteristic that leads to potentially opposing perspectives and experiences, a separate focus group should be formed from each subgroup, and a separate session should be conducted with it. For this reason, several focus groups participate in each research.

Selecting individuals who share some common characteristic that unites them and have the same interests and personal experience facilitates the discussion and makes the focus group more productive. There is no agreement in the qualitative research methods literature on the optimum number of focus groups or participants in groups, though the majority of methodological literature and reviews recommend six to ten participants per focus group as the ideal size for effective discussion and manageability. The maximum number of participants in a focus group is ten or twelve, which allows for a sufficient exchange of opinions. In smaller groups, for instance, those with only four participants, there is a higher risk that one or two individuals may dominate the discussion, thereby discouraging others from active participation. On the other hand, large focus groups become increasingly difficult to manage. When a focus group includes more than twelve participants, the discussion can easily become uncontrolled and lose coherence. There is also a risk that the group will split into smaller subgroups, as participants may lose patience while waiting too long for their turn to speak (Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2017; Nyumba et al., 2018; Hennink, Kaiser, & Weber, 2019).

Homogeneity of the group according to certain criteria (age, professional role, educational level) creates greater freedom of expression, but at the same time can lead to a limitation of the diversity of views. Therefore, balancing between homogeneity and heterogeneity of the group of participants is one of the most significant challenges in the formation of focus groups.

3.4.2. Role of the moderator

The success of focus groups largely depends on the skill of the moderator, who is responsible for asking questions and leading the discussion. When focus groups are conducted for scientific research purposes, it is recommended that the moderator be someone directly involved in the research. This person should possess a thorough understanding of the research topic and its methodological requirements, as well as strong interpersonal skills for effectively managing group dynamics.

The moderator's primary task is to facilitate the discussion in such a way that he or she will have control over the process at all times, without insisting on controlling the content. In other words, the moderator encourages and maintains interaction between the respondents, ensuring that the discussion covers all relevant issues in adequate depth, regardless of whether the answers offered are in line with his or her expectations or not. To ensure this, the moderator needs to know how to balance the demands for sensitivity and empathy, on the one hand, and objectivity and detachment, on the other (Henderson, 1995).

The moderator is expected to show complete respect for the respondents' answers, refraining from any verbal or non-verbal evaluations. In addition to underestimation and belittling, any form of approval or agreement with the answer received should also be avoided (including nodding or short comments like excellent or correct).

It is most appropriate to adopt an attitude of incomplete understanding, but not ignorance. Thus, the moderator should convey a clear image of someone who is there to learn from the participants. In doing so, it is necessary to have the self-discipline to control their personal attitudes and views and never to present them in front of the respondents, so as not to influence their opinions. At the same time, they should also know how to deal with respondents who fall into the categories of self-proclaimed "experts", dominant discussants, shy participants or talkative respondents, in a way that will allow for an equal discussion and will not disrupt the tolerant atmosphere during the focus group session.

To ensure more effective engagement of respondents in discussion, it is often necessary that the moderator be someone with whom participants can identify. In addition to appearance, attention should be given to specific characteristics of the moderator, such as gender, age, ethnicity, language, and socio-economic background.

In addition to the ability to listen attentively to respondents, the moderator must also possess a well-developed skill of asking questions. Besides the pre-formulated questions designed to maintain the focus of the discussion, the moderator often needs to pose additional, more detailed questions aimed at stimulating dialogue and interaction among participants. The timing and manner in which such questions are asked depend on the moderator's judgment and sensitivity to the fundamental requirement of conducting the conversation unobtrusively and with discretion. In this regard, particular importance is placed on probing questions, which serve to elicit further clarification and more specific information (e.g., "Could you tell us why you think so?" or "Could you give us an example?").

The moderator's primary task is to guide the discussion and sustain interaction in the most effective manner possible. During this process, the moderator may take brief notes referring only to key points, intended primarily as reminders for the continuation of the discussion. A specially appointed assistant, who is part of the research team, is responsible for taking detailed notes of the entire discussion. In addition to documenting participants' responses, the assistant also manages the technical equipment used to record the focus group session. It should be noted that audio recording is generally preferred over video recording due to the potentially inhibiting effect of the camera. Nevertheless, it is recommended that either technique be used only in combination with on-site note-taking to ensure completeness and reliability of the data (Henderson, 1995).

3.4.3. Discussion structure

Although focus groups offer some flexibility and a natural flow of conversation, there is still a basic structure that guides the interaction. A focus group discussion typically follows a semi-structured format that balances consistency across sessions with flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth. The structure is designed to guide participants through a gradual process — from general impressions to more specific reflections — while maintaining an open, interactive atmosphere.

Most authors (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997) agree that a well-conducted focus group consists of three main stages: introduction and warm-up phase, main discussion phase and closing phase. The moderator welcomes participants, explains the purpose of the study, outlines confidentiality and ethical guidelines, and establishes group norms. This phase includes icebreaker questions that encourage participants to feel comfortable speaking and to begin engaging with one another. The tone is informal but focused, aiming to build trust and rapport.

This is followed by key thematic questions related to the research problem, which must be formulated clearly and openly to encourage discussion, not simple answers. The main discussion phase is the core of the focus group, where the moderator introduces key topics or questions derived from the research objectives. Discussion moves from broad, open-ended questions to more specific, probing questions, encouraging interaction among participants rather than a series of moderator–respondent exchanges. The moderator’s role is to maintain balance, ensuring that all participants contribute and that dominant voices do not overshadow others.

In the final part or closing phase of the discussion, the moderator summarizes key points, invites participants to reflect or add final thoughts, and may ask a concluding question (e.g., “Is there anything important we haven’t discussed?”). This stage reinforces participants’ sense of contribution and provides closure. The discussion concludes with a summary of the key points and an opportunity for participants to provide any additional comments. The moderator then expresses gratitude to the group and explains how the collected data will be utilized.

The duration of a focus group typically ranges from 60 to 120 minutes, depending on the complexity of the topic and the size of the group. Regardless of the exact format, the discussion structure should promote an interactive, reflexive exchange of perspectives, where meaning emerges from dialogue among participants rather than from individual responses alone (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Such a structure enables a balance between spontaneity and systematicity, which is key to obtaining both rich and relevant data.

3.5. Ethical aspects in the use of focus groups

“Ethical decisions are contextually situated – socially, politically, institutionally, culturally, personally – and each piece of research raises ethical

issues and dilemmas for the researcher.” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p.111). When using qualitative methods, including focus groups, we should carefully consider the ethical considerations, as this technique can yield rich and in-depth information, but it also poses significant ethical challenges that must not be ignored.

One of the main ethical dilemmas, according to Bryman (2016), is the issue of confidentiality and privacy. In individual interviews, the researcher has complete control over the protection of the data. But in focus groups, this is much more difficult, because the information that participants share becomes available to other members of the group. Bryman cautions that the researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality, but can only ask participants to refrain from sharing the topics discussed outside the group. This is especially sensitive in an educational context, where the topics may include personal educational challenges or family issues.

Another important aspect is informed consent. Participants should be fully informed about the nature of the research, how long it will take, how the data will be used, and their right to withdraw consent at any time. In the case of focus groups, this becomes particularly important, as participants need to be informed that the discussion will take place in a group setting, meaning they will not have the same level of privacy as in an individual interview.

Bryman (2016) also draws attention to power dynamics and the possibility of dominance within the group. He believes that there is a risk of a situation in which some participants control the conversation, while others remain in the background. This can lead not only to an uneven distribution of information but also to a feeling of discomfort for those who feel they didn't have the space they needed to voice their opinions. The ethical responsibility of the moderator is to actively manage the discussion and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to express themselves.

Focus groups often deal with personal or sensitive topics, so there is a risk that some questions or comments may cause stress, anxiety, or discomfort among participants. Therefore, the researcher should be careful in choosing topics and questions, as well as in the way the discussion is conducted.

Ethical aspects are not just formalities, but a fundamental requirement for the credibility and integrity of research. Without respect for the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and participant protection, research results could be compromised from both a methodological and a moral perspective.

4. APPLICATION OF FOCUS GROUPS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Focus groups are an important technique in qualitative research, as they allow data collection through dynamic group discussions, rather than just individual opinions. In the context of education, this is particularly useful, since teaching, upbringing and educational policies are experienced and practised in a community. For example, participants such as students, teachers or parents in a group setting often express opinions that they would not share in an

individual interview, because the discussion process encourages associations, disagreements or new ideas.

The use of focus groups in social research opens up many opportunities to better understand social reality and to obtain authentic experiences and opinions that cannot always be expressed through quantitative methods. Focus groups create a context in which participants reflect and build on each other, which encourages the emergence of new ideas and insights that individual interviewing might not have revealed. This is especially important in social research, where group discussion can reveal collective perspectives and depths of understanding.

Another advantage of focus groups is that they allow researchers to explore not only what participants say, but also how they communicate. This can reveal a lot about their relationships, attitudes, and values in the educational context. This approach uncovers hidden attitudes, informal practices, and cultural patterns that often go unnoticed in standard research.

Moreover, focus groups are an efficient method in terms of time and resources needed to collect the data. In a single session, the opinions and experiences of multiple participants can be obtained. This method allows for the rapid collection of a rich corpus of data, which can then be analyzed and used to create recommendations.

In contemporary social research, focus groups are increasingly used in mixed-methods designs, where they complement quantitative data by providing contextual depth and explanatory insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The use of focus groups allows for the identification of key problems, challenges and opportunities in the educational process, as well as for the discovery of teachers' and parents' views on various social practices. In this sense, they serve not only as a data collection tool but also as a means of empowering participants and fostering reflexivity within the research process.

Ultimately, the advantages and possibilities of using focus groups in social research are related to their ability to approximate the complex reality of a social process through the voices of those who most directly experience it. They offer a more authentic and multifaceted analysis, which can be of great importance for improving policy and practice.

5. Conclusion

Focus groups are a comprehensive way to collect data in social research, as they offer the opportunity to directly understand the opinions, attitudes, and experiences of participants in an interactive and stimulating environment. Focus groups create a different dynamic than individual interviews, as participants are inspired by each other, leading to a deeper and broader understanding of the phenomenon being researched. This technique allows for the collection of qualitative data that complements the quantitative approach, which allows for a multifaceted analysis of social processes.

When using focus groups, the role of the moderator in leading the group discussion is particularly important, as is the need for careful planning of the questionnaires and structuring of the discussion in order to obtain relevant and reliable data. Limitations, such as social desirability or the dominance of some participants, should be anticipated and minimized.

In summary, focus groups have proven to be a valuable and effective technique in social research, facilitating a deeper understanding of processes, identifying participants' needs, and formulating recommendations for practical application. Their interactive and reflective nature makes this research method important in contemporary social inquiry. Numerous successful examples demonstrate how focus groups have contributed to a better understanding of social processes and to tangible improvements in policy development, practice and broader social approaches. Consequently, focus groups in social research should be regarded not merely as a data collection tool, but as a powerful instrument for promoting practical change.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Natasha Angeloska Galevska is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. She is the author of several university textbooks, including Statistical Data Analysis, Qualitative Research Methods, and Academic Speaking and Writing, as well as more than fifty chapters and articles published in academic volumes and peer-reviewed journals. She has held several academic leadership positions, such as Vice-Dean and Head of Doctoral Studies in Pedagogy for two consecutive terms.

Elena Galevska is a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana. Having completed two Bachelor's degrees and an international Master's programme, she has developed a strong foundation in research methods. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD in business logistics. In addition, she has gained professional experience in both the non-governmental, freelancing, and for-profit sectors. In addition, she has attended multiple conferences and is the author of several publications.

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