Focus groups as a research method: a critique of some aspects of their use in nursing research

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Introduction
Focus groups as a method of data collection seem to have grown in popularity in nursing in recent years, as evidenced by the number of publications reporting their use. In the process of reviewing the method as part of the planning process for several empirical research projects, it emerged that focus groups were being used in nursing not solely for qualitative research but for a number of other purposes perhaps more closely related to their earlier uses in political and marketing programmes. Furthermore, many articles were "theoretical discussion" papers not based on actual experience...
Methodological issues in nursing research

With the method and relying on secondary sources in nursing literature rather than citing the original developers of the method or social science writings on the methodology. The most notable issue was the variety of data analysis methods in use, some of which did not seem strictly appropriate to the method. Therefore it was decided to conduct a more systematic analysis of the published material in relation to nursing research.

Search strategy

Because the interest was specifically in nursing research, a search was conducted using the CINAHL database and the keywords ‘focus groups’ limited by the term ‘research’ and to the period 1990–1999 and articles written in English. This yielded 124 articles, of which 22 were published in or since 1995. Thus it appears that enthusiasm in nursing for the method in the early 1990s diminished somewhat in the second half of the decade.

Abstracts of the articles were scrutinized and those appearing to be research-based and concerned with nursing were obtained for detailed reading. This reduced the total to 33 articles obviously reporting nonresearch-based work (descriptions/discussion of method \( n = 32 \), service development \( n = 28 \), health promotion, \( n = 10 \), curriculum development \( n = 10 \), teaching \( n = 4 \), miscellaneous \( n = 7 \) ) being omitted. Nevertheless, when the 33 retained articles were examined it emerged that only 16 were actually based on experience of conducting a piece of empirical research. The remaining 17 were discussions of the method based on references to the literature and were very much in the ‘how to’ genre. Hand searching of the articles did not identify any further relevant papers. Thus, despite the earlier attempt to screen out nonresearch articles, the majority of the 33 articles were not research-based or -related. Many were very short and simplistic and clearly not based on any systematic consideration either of the available literature or of the method as a research tool (See for example Fox 1993a, Clarke 1999); articles of this type were usually published in ‘professional’ rather than ‘academic’ journals. This highlights the importance of a systematic consideration of a research method when planning a study and is a reminder of the fact that computerized databases must be used critically when attempting to identify relevant articles for such a review.

Conclusions from the search

From the search and preliminary scrutiny it emerged that the apparent surge in nursing interest in focus groups as a qualitative research method was not confirmed. There was indeed an increase in use of the method, but this had occurred more in relation to nursing education and management projects than to research studies. The next stage in the attempt to understand how the method should be used in research, and in particular at the data analysis stage, involved detailed reading of the remaining 16 articles and following up relevant references in the articles themselves. The rest of this article is devoted to a consideration of the findings from this extended process.

Definitions and processes of focus groups

Much has been written about what focus groups are and how to conduct them. The more in-depth theoretical discussions appear in the social science literature, the most-cited experts being the North Americans, Merton (Merton et al. 1956), who has been credited with initiating the use of focus groups in social science, and more recently, Morgan (1988, 1993), who has been a leading exponent of the method. In the United Kingdom (UK), a recent edited collection of papers on focus group research by social scientists is concerned with ‘Developing Focus Group Research’ (Barbour & Kitzinger 1999).

As the uses, advantages and disadvantages of focus groups have been explored in these readily available sources, as well as the nursing articles mentioned earlier, they will not be rehearsed again here. Rather the discussion will explore methodological issues emerging from the review, and specifically compatibility between methodological approaches and focus groups as a method, interaction among participants as a key feature of the method, and data analysis. A consideration of definitions of focus groups will pave the way for this discussion.

Definitions

A straightforward definition of focus groups is given by Krueger (1994, pp. 10–11):

The focus group interview... taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us.

This definition links to the principal justification for using focus groups, which is that they ‘capitalize(s) on the interaction within a group to elicit rich experiential data’ (Asbury 1995, p. 414).

Developing this emphasis on interaction, Kitzinger (1995, p. 299) writes that:
The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview... When group dynamics work well the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions.

Drawing attention to the diversity of uses of the term ‘focus groups’, Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, p. 4) initially define them as ‘group discussions exploring a specific set of issues’ that are ‘focused’ because the process involves ‘some kind of collective activity’. This is done by the researcher ‘encouraging’ participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others’ experiences and points of view. However, while distinguishing other methods such as group interviews, nominal groups, brainstorming, Delphi groups and other consensus groups from focus groups, they conclude that the key feature of focus groups is the active encouragement of group interaction among participants.

Thus, all definitions of focus groups centre on the use of interaction among participants as a way of accessing data that would not emerge if other methods were used. Interaction is the key to the method, giving the method a high level of face validity (Krueger 1994) because what participants say can be confirmed, reinforced or contradicted within the group discussion.

Focus groups and phenomenology: methodological incompatibility

A number of variants of phenomenology have become the basis of approaches to qualitative research and a brief overview of these is given by Holloway and Wheeler (1996). However, it is fundamental to phenomenology that it:

- thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its most comprehensive sense, it refers to the totality of the lived experiences that belong to a single person (Giorgi 1997, p. 236).

The goal of phenomenological research is to seek the ‘essences’, essential or invariant characteristics of phenomena and to achieve this, ‘naïve’ subjects are asked to ‘respond to a research question, either by interview or description’ (Giorgi 1989, p. 72). In other words, an individual is encouraged, through asking them a broad and general question of the type ‘Tell me what it was like to be told that you had cancer’, to describe their experiences of a phenomenon. A phenomenological approach requires that an individual describes their experiences in a relatively ‘uncontaminated’ way and therefore a group method of data collection involving interaction between several participants is not compatible with phenomenological research.

Despite the fact that a phenomenological approach is incompatible with a focus group method, a number of the research reports traced in the search have used this combination. It therefore seems appropriate to discuss this incompatibility in further detail in order to demonstrate the problems that can arise from this mismatch.

Issues of rigour in focus group research have been addressed by suggesting that more than one researcher analyse the data to establish reliability (McDaniel 1996, Higginbottom 1998) and that the data analysis be fed back to participants for ‘member checking’ of its validity or plausibility as an explanation of what was said (Higginbottom 1998). However, this too would not be compatible with a phenomenological approach, which recognizes that ‘If the essential description truly captures the intuited essence, one has validity in a phenomenological sense’ (Giorgi 1988, p. 173). That is, if a description is judged plausible by the researcher who has written it, who has used a transparent and systematic approach to data analysis and has communicated this to others, including accounting for the steps of the analysis process, then that description is ‘valid’. Another researcher or any of the research participants might produce another version, but that in itself does not render the first version ‘invalid’ – it merely adds another plausible description for readers to examine. This argument applies equally to the descriptive phenomenological approach taken by Giorgi and to the interpretive or hermeneutic approach of Heidegger, Van Manen and colleagues. Thus, some of the procedures recommended by users of focus groups to ensure ‘validity’ or rigour are not compatible with a phenomenological approach. There is not space here to consider the debate about the use of terms such as ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ and alternative approaches to ‘rigour’ in evaluating qualitative research, but these have been addressed elsewhere (See for example, Morse 1991, 1994).

Nevertheless, Gray-Vickrey (1993, p. 21) claims that:

Focus groups are well suited for a full range of qualitative studies including grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology.

She claims to have carried out a phenomenologic [sic] study using a focus group to study the experiences of caregivers of relatives with Alzheimer’s disease. The picture is further complicated because, as is appropriate to phenomenological research, the focus group was begun by asking two general, open questions: ‘Tell me what is has been like to take care of...’ and ‘What are your feelings about this caregiving experience?’ (p. 24) However, Gray-Vickrey justifies asking these questions by appealing to the work of Spradley and

Methodological issues in nursing research

Focus groups: a critique of nursing research

calling them ‘grand tour questions’. Spradley’s work is grounded in an ethnosemantic and not a phenomenological approach (Spradley 1979). There is no discussion of phenomenology in the article and no reference to phenomenological sources. This article therefore represents an example of the point made earlier about the adoption of a research approach without going back to primary sources, resulting in claims that do not stand up to any attempt at rigorous criticism.

A confusion between methodology and methods or techniques is also made by Nyamathi and Schuler (1990, p. 1283) when they write that focus groups are:
	a qualitative method which bears similarities to ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and participant observation.


Data analysis

Techniques of data analysis are seldom discussed in any detail or at all in accounts of focus groups research (Carey 1995, Frankland & Bloor 1999) and this was also the case in the nursing research focus groups identified earlier. Stevens (1996, p. 172) claims that ‘any number of qualitative analysis strategies can be adapted to these purposes’ and Sloan (1998, p. 41) similarly states that ‘analysing data from focus groups is essentially the same as analysing qualitative data from other sources’. Carey (1995, p. 126) writes of analysis processes varying from the ‘less intense’ (coding and categorizing) to the ‘more intense’ (grounded theory). Apparently taking the same position, many authors write about using various techniques of cutting and pasting, both manual and computerized, in a process of coding, categorizing and identifying themes (e.g. Reiskin 1992, Fox 1993a, Fox 1993b, DiLorio et al. 1994, Ivdall & Rooke 1998, Morrison & Peoples 1999). Some writers recommend the use of analysis grids drawn out on paper to aid organization of data and identification of themes (Miles & Huberman 1994, Higginbottom 1998, Robinson 1999).

Sometimes the analysis process is referred to as ‘content analysis (McDaniel 1996, McFarland et al. 1998, Sim 1998), but this term is more usually reserved for techniques used to quantify qualitative data by counting frequencies of occurrences of words, phrases or themes as discussed by Krippendorff (1980) and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990). ‘Latent’ as well as ‘manifest’ content may be identified using this method, but this may also rely on quantification of data. Carey (1995, p. 492) points out that any attempt at counting frequencies in this way is inappropriate ‘unless a question is directly asked or probed for... across groups’, and Robinson (1999, p. 909) agrees that ‘it is not appropriate to give percentages’. In other words, quantification should only be used when all respondents (in the case of individual interviews) or groups (in the case of focus groups) have been asked the same question. Otherwise the results of counts are merely serendipitous and ‘will generally not be meaningful’ (Carey 1995, p. 492).

Reports do not give details of whether focus groups were conducted in the same way when more than one was used in a particular study. Therefore it is plausible to assume that they were similarly conducted. Thus, as Robinson (1999, p. 909) points out, ‘each transcript must be looked at in the same way, and all the transcripts must be used’ so that analysis is systematic. However, some reports claim to have used ‘grounded theory’ as a data analysis method and the next section will consider the appropriateness of this.

Grounded theory and focus groups

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 23):

A grounded theory is one that is ... discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other.

The method is characterized by the use of theoretical sampling, constant comparative data analysis, theoretical sensitivity, memo writing, identification of a core category and the concept of ‘theoretical saturation’.

Four of the articles identified in the literature search for this article claim to have used grounded theory as a method for data analysis. However, they do not report having used concurrent data generation and analysis as would be required in grounded theory. As the above criteria demonstrate, for grounded theory method to be claimed, data should be subjected to constant comparative analysis as additional data are collected. On the basis of the developing coding system and increasing theoretical sensitivity developed by the researcher as the analysis continues, theoretical sampling should be used to gather additional data in an attempt to corroborate or otherwise existing data and to elaborate on the categories and their properties and interlinkages. This process of iteration continues until a core category is identified and there is theoretical saturation. That stage marks the end of data
collection because additional data is not adding to the analysis.

It is clear that, if several focus groups are conducted in a similar way and then the transcripts are subjected to a grounded theory type of analysis, this does not fulfil the criteria for grounded theory. Sim (1998) argues that data analysis of several groups should be done concurrently in order to determine when there is consensus on the issues considered relevant by group members, and refers to this consensus as ‘saturation’. However, he does not discuss grounded theory as such, and indeed writes that ‘analysis of focus group data is likely to follow the same process as for other sources of qualitative data’ and that ‘many of the problems that arise in analysing focus group data are those relating to qualitative data in general’ (Sim 1998, p. 348). Thus, he seems to miss the point that data collection methods will vary in order to be consistent with a researcher’s underlying methodological approach. Also, he selectively adopts some but not all of the features of grounded theory without explaining the reasons for this.

An example of this claimed ground theory method being used but only after data had been collected is provided by the report of Goss (1998) who used five focus groups to study nurses working in women’s health care and the topic of violence against women. The report mainly discusses methodological issues and very little detail is given of the substantive research project. However, Goss reports using ‘a four-step process of data analysis for focus group data’ (p. 33) developed by Koniak-Griffin et al. (1994). Following transcription and accuracy checking, step 2 ‘involves the techniques borrowed from grounded theory’ of coding and developing themes and categories. Step 3 uses ‘constant comparative procedures, both within and among groups’ and this is continued ‘until saturation is reached’. Step 4 involves validation using ‘an outside researcher familiar with the focus group method but uninvolved with the data collection’ and ‘respondent validation’ (p. 33). Thus it seems that all data were collected and the analysis was conducted afterwards rather than concurrently. The method cannot then legitimately be called ‘grounded theory’, because the essence of the method is that it is ‘cumulative’, as was discussed earlier and as Strauss and Corbin themselves explain:

Each event sampled builds from and adds to previous data collection and analysis. Moreover, sampling becomes more specific with time because the analyst is directed by the evolving theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 203).

Carey and Smith (1994) term grounded theory a ‘more intense’ method of analysing focus group data but Carey’s later methodological article on the analysis of focus group data does not use the term explicitly. Instead she writes that ‘purposively sampling within relevant categories will enhance the likelihood of saturation of data’ as will conducting ‘more than one group for each salient segment (of the population)’ (p. 491). She also writes that:

Often it is useful for the guideline questions to be refined with increased understanding of the topic as the study progresses. Although analysis across sessions will be somewhat limited by the lack of total comparability of data, the refined questions should provide more useful data (Carey 1995, p. 491).

This approach therefore closely parallels the grounded theory method but does not use that term and does not speak of core category identification or theorizing that are basic features of grounded theory.

Grounded theory was the approach chosen by Donovan (1995) for a study of men during their partners’ pregnancies. This was the only nursing study traced which explicitly described all stages of the method as being used in the research in an appropriate way. Men were recruited via a general practice and focus group data were collected with them over a 6-month period. These data were supplemented by observations in antenatal classes conducted by midwives. A research diary was also recorded. Donovan describes how:

coding, analysis of data and theorizing occurred simultaneously... Logic diagrams... and memos were written throughout the process to guide thinking and to record analytical insights and interpretations... the researcher employed the steps of reduction, selective sampling of the literature, and selective sampling of the data for the purpose of describing the analysis and presenting substantiation for the conclusions drawn (Donovan 1995, p. 712).

If a grounded theory method is to be used for data analysis, then, this must be built in to a study from its conception because data generation and analysis need to occur concurrently. If this is not done, it is hard to see the justification for calling an analytic method ‘grounded theory’ rather than ‘thematic analysis’, which is what seems to have been used in most of the articles traced for this review. Thematic analysis is described by Kitzinger and Barbour (1999, p. 16) as:

Drawing together and comparing discussion of similar themes and examining how these related to the variation between individuals and between groups.

**Reporting focus group findings: interaction**

As the definitions of focus groups have shown, a key feature of the method is the exploitation of group interaction among participants to stimulate the generation of data that might
Focus groups: a critique of nursing research

Focus groups are different to other methods of data collection, and it is important to maintain a sense of the whole group within the analysis (p. 150).

This also presents a ‘challenge’ in presenting data and this should:

- Ideally contain examples of the discursive nature of the method, by using two or more participants in any quotations rather than presenting isolated excerpts from one individual (p. 151).

‘Sequences of discussion’ are given by Reed and Payton (1997) in their article discussing ‘issues of analysis and interpretation’ in their study of the experiences of older people moving into residential care. The sequences are used to illustrate how consensus evolved as opinions were modified and developed through discussion. Using sequence analysis in this kind also allowed the researchers to see how processes varied in their different groups. They also comment on the dominance of one member in a group, where a manager dominated the discussion so much that it was more like an interview with one person. This raises questions about the way the group was moderated and the skills of the moderator, which are discussed in a number of articles (Morgan 1995, Macleod Clark et al. 1996, Sim 1998, Kitzinger & Barbour 1999).

Idvall and Rook (1998) used ‘interaction quotations’ (p. 518) to illustrate process aspects of their focus group study of nursing care in surgical wards. This involved a coding system to identify individual speakers and the groups in which they participated. In addition an arrow was used between quotations to illustrate interactions. However, specific points identified from this interaction coding system are not discussed in the article and the conclusion drawn from this aspect is disappointing in view of the promise raised by the coding system:

(If) can be considered an effective use of time to conduct focus group interviews if you are interested in group rather than individual opinions (p. 518).

The only specific guidance found in the articles traced for this review was given by Stevens (1996). In an article reporting on focus groups as a method for studying community health issues, and in particular her own work with lesbians’ health care experiences, she proposes the following questions as a basis for analysing group interaction:

- How closely did the group adhere to the issues presented for discussion?
- Why, how and when were related issues brought up?
- What statements seemed to evoke conflict?
What were the contradictions in the discussion?
What common experiences were expressed?
Were alliances formed among group members?
Was a particular member or viewpoint silenced?
Was a particular view dominant?
How did the group resolve disagreements?
What topics produced consensus?
Whose interests were being represented in the group?
How were emotions handled?

(Stevens 1996, p. 172)

In the section of the article reporting on the ‘application of focus group method’ in her lesbian health project, a paragraph is specifically devoted to describing interaction and reporting jokes, disagreements, and a ‘growing consciousness of collective phenomena’ (p. 173) as the discussion progressed. The groups also allowed members to gain ‘insights about their own experiences … that they had not had before the discussion’ (p. 174) and to share solutions to problems of how to access the health care system. The focus groups thus had a ‘consciousness raising’ effect for participants. In further sections giving ‘selected findings’ Stevens gives more information on group processes in order to contextualize quotations from the transcripts. Stevens, then, goes further than any of the other nursing articles discussed both in giving explicit guidelines on analysing process aspects of focus groups and also in actually discussing her data in terms of group interaction. It would be useful for other researchers to experiment with applying her scheme to their own data and to modify and develop it on the basis of their own experiences.

Summary and conclusions

The CINAHL-based literature search that formed the basis for this discussion identified only a small number of articles reporting empirical research using focus groups in the period 1990–1999. Scrutiny of these articles and discussions of the method by nurse authors revealed disappointingly superficial and uncritical discussions and implementations of the method. In particular, methodological incompatibilities had not been recognized between phenomenology and focus groups, and the requirements of a grounded theory approach to data generation and analysis had not been respected. It was common for authors to rely on secondary rather than primary sources and this may help to account for the misinterpretations. The principal advantage claimed for focus groups, namely the ability to use participant interaction to gain in-depth and rich data that would not be obtained through individual interviews, was rarely capitalized on. One author proposed a list of questions to guide analysis of group processes and this is recommended to future researchers as a possible aid to gaining the benefits of this aspect of the method.

A more general conclusion is that nurse researchers should study in greater depth the methodological underpinnings of their proposed methods and should discuss these fully in their reports. Where the word limits of journals prohibit a full discussion of methodology then a separate article may be needed, and this should be based on consultation of primary sources. Whether articles are published in ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ journals a rigorous approach to methodology is essential, not only to ensure the integrity of the research being reported but also because these articles will be consulted by nurses and students attempting to develop their research knowledge. Nursing research does not stand in isolation from research in other disciplines, particularly the social sciences. It is to be hoped that nursing scholarship will lead to methodological learning and progress both for the discipline of nursing and more widely, and not be confined to abstract empiricist research of interest only to nurses. The social sciences contribute to the knowledge base of nursing and this relationship should be reciprocal if nursing knowledge is to achieve higher status and wider recognition. This article is intended to be a contribution towards this development.

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Focus groups: a critique of nursing research


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