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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

2. Focus groups in evaluation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A third approach, thematic analysis, offers a meaningful and common alternative for the analysis of evaluation oriented focus groups (Boyatzis, 1998; Frankland & Bloor, 2001; Webb & Kevern, 2001; Wiggins, 2004), when the intent is to understand the underlying themes and relationships that explain the organization, functioning, or impacts associated with a program (Krueger & Casey, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000). This approach suggests that qualitative analysis involves the search for common themes emerging from group dynamics and the open interplay among participants. These themes may reflect a range of individual attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, as well as touching on otherwise unarticulated norms and social values (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). As a review of published evaluation research using focus groups (Wiggins, 2004), thematic analysis was the most common approach to data analysis. Unfortunately, this approach to the identification of themes appears to occur with little guidance regarding the organization or techniques of analysis (Ryan &
addresses, the questions posed. It includes responses to specific information that is expressed in response to, or specifically interest to the evaluator. Articulated data, then, is defined as that questions are a request for specific information about a question of discussion points presented in the questioning route. The articulated offered by participants to directly address the questions or

3. Purpose of the paper

The purpose of the current article is to reconcile the methodological approach discussed by Krueger and Casey (2000), and commonly used in evaluation efforts, with a qualitative data analytic model that emphasizes thematic analysis. The data analytic approaches of grounded theory and phenomenology will not be discussed further. In this article, a model is proposed to help clarify the kinds of data that emerge from a thematic approach to analysis and provide some simple guidance on the opportunities and limitations of such data.

Data derived from the raw material of focus group transcripts are described as falling into three levels that fit the thematic approach to latent data analysis. These three levels of data are characterized as articulated, attributional, and emergent. This model is offered as a means to clarify the process of interpretation of focus group results and make analysis more transparent to evaluation research consumers.

Articulated data is defined as that data that arises in direct response to the questions and prompts provided in the discussion guide. This data offers, in the participants’ own words, their descriptions, interpretations, and commentary on the topics of interest. At the second level, attributional data derives from comments and discussion that relate to a priori theories, operating hypotheses, or research questions that the evaluator brings to the study. This will include data applied to ‘the search for signals or indicators reflecting theories of interest’ (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 33), and data that illustrates hypothesized contrasts across groups, respondents, or time periods (Massey et al., 2005; Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Finally, we reserve the term emergent data for that information that contributes to new insights and hypothesis formulation and is the unanticipated product of individual comments and exchanges among group members. This will include data that touch on unspoken cultural perspectives and normative values that are presumed to contribute to the participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

It is proposed that each of these kinds of data is relevant and valuable for the evaluator and that each adds to our understanding of meaning from the group perspective. The value of distinguishing these three kinds of data lies in the evaluator’s obligation to be explicit and methodical (Patton, 1999; Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and in the guidance it offers the consumer of evaluations in (a) understanding how topical information acquires relevance in the analysis, (b) confirming the degree to which the analysis has relied on the enumeration of content contributed by the participants or inferred meaning and conclusions drawn by the analyst, (c) distinguishing data that is linked to a priori versus emergent hypotheses, and (d) increasing our confidence that these conclusions might be reasonably translated to other groups, other programs, or larger cultural expectations. A thorough description of these types of data and illustrations of their use and value are provided below.

4. Articulated data

The first kind of data emerges from a focus group is the data that is offered by participants to directly address the questions or discussion points presented in the questioning route. The articulated questions are a request for specific information about a question of interest to the evaluator. Articulated data, then, is defined as that information that is expressed in response to, or specifically addresses, the questions posed. It includes responses to specific questions and probes by the moderator, as well as conversation that emerges among participants as they discuss these questions.

This data is what is discussed in the analysis of focus groups as described by Krueger and Casey (2000) and others (Bertrand et al., 1992; Knodel, 1993). In describing the long table method of data analysis, Krueger and Casey (2000, p. 132) propose that the first step is to separate responses to questions and determine if group participants answer the question or not. If an answer addresses the question that was posed in the group, the answer is assembled with others addressing the question. If it addresses another question, it is moved to the group of responses associated with that question. If an exchange does not answer any of the questions posed, it is set aside. The analysis then concentrates on combining and interpreting the answers to each of the articulated questions.

Articulated data deals with attitudes, beliefs, observations, experiences, opinions and preferences that are all referents to the question posed by the researcher. Articulated data reflects the “language and concepts that participants use to structure their experiences” (Hughes & DuMont, 1993, p. 776), and reflects opportunities to ‘access the everyday language’ of participants (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 10). Articulated data will also include the participants’ comments and reactions to other members as they agree, qualify, or disagree, providing insight into the participants’ thinking (Ansary, Perlmutter & Nelson, 2004).

We draw inferences from this data to expand our understanding of the issues of interest. The researcher has the opportunity to consolidate, interpret and derive inferences from the articulated responses to specific questions. Often in our dealings with stakeholders, a principle concern is how to obtain a greater understanding of the way participants interpret issues, the boundaries they place on definitions, and the relevance and importance they attribute to topics under discussion. Articulated data provides this information. The value of this information is directly related to the degree to which it offers insight regarding our questions of interest.

For example, in one study (Massey et al., 2005), staff were asked to describe their experiences with consent and confidentiality of services for students in school. In reply, an agency director responded by saying in part “…we felt like we were walking on eggshells regarding confidentiality…” This succinct and pithy response offered a clear and insightful description of the experience of this clinical professional and had immediate relevance for the question of interest. It imparts understanding and allows us to share the experience of the professional.

In an evaluation, relevance may take the form of offering greater clarity to an issue, helping define important domains, or determining meaning for participants. What does success mean for parents of children in a reading program? What does being culturally sensitive mean to representatives of the neighborhood? While surveys may address the degree to which certain standards have been met across the community, focus groups may provide clues as to what the standards are.

This does not mean that the search for patterns does not exist in the analysis of articulated data. Evaluators may use both inductively and deductively derived codes to organize data into meaningful categories (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Boyatzis, 1998; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), may identify recurring themes or ideas, or develop hypotheses and draw conclusions regarding the meaning or implications of the data (Bloor et al., 2001). The distinguishing feature of articulated data is its link to specific questions. The depth of analysis that is possible will depend on the quality and richness of the data that is available and on the capacity of the evaluator to make the case for the themes that are proposed. This first layer of data is the most visible, and in many cases interpretations of this data are the most defensible conclusions that can be drawn in a study.
4.1. Strengths and limitations of articulated data

We must also recognize the strengths and limitations of articulated data. One advantage of articulated data is the opportunity to explore the various interpretations of the questions by group members and further define or operationalize constructs (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Participants may rephrase questions and offer their answer to their new and improved question. It will also identify related ideas; these things that participants feel are relevant for understanding the issues. The advantage of articulated data is in the depth of understanding that might be derived from the capacity of group participants to recast issues from their own perceptual framework and expand on that perspective in conversation with other intimates of the issues.

Articulated data has the added value of being derived from the interplay of participants in a tolerant atmosphere with few presuppositions regarding context and framing. Participants have the opportunity to react to one another and to expound or contradict the statements of other members. The evaluator has the opportunity to understand some of the nuances of how issues are defined, and the range of perspectives available in the group. Exchanges among participants offer expository value for the issues at hand.

Finally, the interpretation of articulated data is the most easily defended. Questions are asked and answers provided. Articulated data emerging from the group requires no dissembling; the purpose of the group is clearly described and reflected in the questions asked of participants, and the purpose of questioning and the aims of the study may be shared (cf. Mc Lafferty, 2004). Thus, the credibility of findings taken directly from participants is enhanced (Thayer & Fine, 2001).

In reporting this data and drawing conclusions from it, the language and terminology of the participants can be offered to buttress any conclusions drawn by the evaluator and quotations may be used to corroborate findings (Wiggins, 2004). The researcher may present discrete examples such as “the focus group question asked this...” and the “participant(s) said this...” The interpretative nature of the research should be explicit and generally defensible from the examples that are made available in the participants’ own words.

There are limitations to the use of articulated data as well. Articulated data is dependent on the questions posed in the group. The value of articulated data rests with the value of questions asked. If questions are confusing or irrelevant, or if the moderator fails to provide useful and meaningful prompts, the focus group may fail to capture the participants’ meanings. Poor questions may fail to cultivate any new insights, leaving the evaluator scrambling to draw meaning from sparse communication.

The evaluator may also need to translate the statements of the participants for the reader or embed expressions in the larger context of the group (Morgan, 1997). The analyst must have the opportunity to weave comments together to form a larger picture of the topic of interest. A participant’s statements may say more when taken together than when examined piecemeal across a discussion (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997).

A second potential problem lies with reliance on manifest content. Articulated data includes both manifest and latent content (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). An emphasis on manifest content may sometimes lead to reducing data to counts of how often an issue or theme arises, or how many members of the group(s) expressed an opinion or attitude. Some qualitative analysis tools aid this process by offering running counts of events or extracted themes (Patton, 2002). While the use of counts of data may serve important purposes in analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the focus group is usually not about counting, even in a sophisticated way, the occurrence of an issue or the number times a phrase or theme is identified (Asbury, 1995; Carey, 1994; Kitzinger, 1994; Webb & Kevern, 2001). The technique remains qualitative and the methodology does not preserve any confidence that these counts are anything more than the relativistic results of the particular makeup of the groups. Thus, while manifest content may be extracted, the latent content will be the most relevant.

5. Attributional data

It can be argued that articulated data should be the choice for the evaluator when the topic allows a direct request for information. Whether it is an opinion about program effectiveness or the quality of organizational culture, a clear question offers participants the direct opportunity to express their opinions, share their experiences, and draw meaning from the group discussion. This elucidation is one of the strengths of the focus group method and leads to a more thorough examination of a topic than can be had in an individually administered survey or interview.

There will be occasions, however, when direct questions are not likely to offer enlightening responses. Direct questions may induce such demand characteristics or violate such organizational or cultural standards that meaningful interpretation becomes impossible. Evaluators can imagine any number of situations where a direct question is likely to lead to obfuscation or the type of enlightenment. Examples include asking a group of middle managers to describe their superior’s management style, asking assistant principals their take on new school policies, or asking service workers whether they have implemented mandated services. Participants are likely to limit their conversation to content that exposes them to the least controversy.

Alternatively, the evaluator may hypothesize that meaningful interpretations might be drawn from listening to the way a management style, a policy, or service orientation arises during other group discussions. The evaluator may choose to address issues obliquely to determine if new values will be voiced, if new language has been adopted, or to see how often critical concepts are volunteered. Questions may also be couched in general terms with the expectation that the most critical issues, from the perspective of the group members, will ‘bubble up’ in the conversation.

If an evaluator is interested in understanding the extent to which a service program has adopted a client-driven perspective, he/she might ask focus group members if they consider the program client-driven, or might ask them to provide examples of how the program has implemented client-driven services. Unfortunately, such direct questioning includes high demand characteristics. Most participants will likely search for such examples, even if they have little faith that client-centered services are in use in the setting.

Rather, the evaluator might ask participants to describe their vision of services, or describe how services come to be determined for individual cases. The evaluator might hypothesize that the ability to describe a consumer driven emphasis or volunteering examples of practices that reflect the standard in question may be attributed to having developed a client-centered perspective. The failure or inability to describe client-driven principles or illustrate examples of their use, may be attributed to a lack of emphasis, familiarity, or commitment to client-driven services.

In these cases the evaluator is attributing responses, or lack of responses, to a hypothesized expectation. These examples of the use of pre-ordinate codes (Wiggins, 2004), or ‘if-then tests’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994) involve propositions of the sort that if a condition of interest occurs, then certain content will be expressed. This is a search to fit data to relevant themes or a search for signs and signals that fit theory driven codes (Boyatzis, 1998). For example, Hyden and Bulow (2003) conducted focus groups with
various professionals regarding burnout. The nature of the study, however, was to analyze how participants might respond to questions as both individuals and as group members, and how they might shift their mode of interacting during the group process. The articulated questions provided the opportunity to investigate other group processes.

Data may also arise in more planful ways when evaluators have research questions or hypotheses to test. We may find this approach in 'program theory-driven' evaluations (Donaldson, 2009). Focus groups may be used as a framework to test contrasts among groups, participants, or over time. Massey et al. (2005), conducted focus groups of service providers that were organized by their employment status. It was hypothesized that school employed mental health providers would define program sustainability differently than those who were employed by community agencies. The contrasts in the language and experiences of the participants demonstrated organizational differences in service sustainability. Hughes and Dumont (1993), compared occupational experiences of African-Americans by holding separate groups for blue-collar and white-collar participants and contrasting the resulting discussions. A study by Hollander (2004), involved dividing participants into groups of either mixed gender, males only, or females only, with the intent of understanding how participants experienced violence and to explore issues of silence and speech within groups. These examples use data to draw inferences regarding ‘theory driven or prior-research-driven’ themes (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 99).

The data that emerges from hypothesis testing and theory driven thematic coding, is labeled attributional data to reflect that it arises from its assignment to meaning based on the interpretation of its relevance for issues of interest. The evaluator as analyst must attribute these comments to the propositions under consideration. From this attribution, the data gains relevance and value.

Because attributional data is proposition or hypothesis driven, it depends on carefully constructed procedures and an interview guide that will establish opportunities for participants to touch on the areas of interest even if they are not directly questioned. It is incumbent upon the evaluator to explicate any hypotheses a priori in order to strengthen the readers’ confidence that these attributional findings were considered in developing the discussion guide and determining procedures, rather than being purely serendipitous.

5.1. Strengths and limitations of attributional data

An advantage of the search for attributional data is the strength of a priori specification of codes or hypothesized contrasts. Specifying codes or if-then propositions may help integrate existing concepts (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007), build on theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994), increase the confidence and credibility of the research (Devers, 1999; Patton, 1999) and increase transparency for stakeholders (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The evaluator has the opportunity to specify the hypothesized group differences and may be able to offer examples of differences in attitudes, observations, and experiences expected to be provided by participants.

The strength of attributional data lies with the degree to which the evaluator can defend the attributions that have been made. For articulated data, representative quotes and comments may suffice. For attributional data, some greater description of the commentary and some explanation of how conclusions were drawn may be necessary. The analysis of attributional data is thus a more ambitious undertaking. The evaluator must demonstrate that the attributions are reasonable. The presence of any disconfirming examples and evidence of analytic induction (Frankland & Bloor, 2001), may further strengthen the readers’ faith in the quality of such conclusions as well.

Potential limitations associated with attributional data include the risk of discounting data that fails to confirm the propositions of interest, forcing data to fit existing codes, the failure to obtain complete data, and the failure to document the chain of evidence (Bloor et al., 2001; Bradley et al., 2007; Caudle, 2004). Attributional data requires far greater inference and may at times fail for lack of sufficient examples to judge hypotheses. The evaluator must be willing to concede when the data is not sufficient to offer a fair test of the hypothesis under consideration.

It is not always the case that hypotheses will be confirmed. Massey et al. (2005), failed to confirm hypothesized differences between internal and external providers regarding their perceptions of service accountability. It is incumbent on the researcher to carefully describe the extent and degree of supporting evidence for any conclusions that are drawn. Evidence that supports hypotheses will be more defensible than the lack of such confirmation, although both approaches may be used. Comments that illustrate the use of client centered services will be taken as a stronger argument for the existence of such services, than a failure to provide examples of services as an argument for their lack.

6. Emergent data

These two forms of data are not all that is available in focus groups. Focus groups also offer data on meanings, group processes, and normative understandings that are normally unarticulated and for which we may have few, if any, hypotheses (Bloor et al., 2001). In these instances we move from more “theory-driven to data-driven approaches” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 29). The use of the term emergent data is reserved for that information related to group meanings, processes, and norms that add new insights and generate new hypothesis and is the unanticipated product of comments and exchanges of group members. This is the data that most contributes to inductively derived themes and is contrasted with the more deductive a priori themes of attributional data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). These include the “unarticulated normative assumptions” that underlie social behavior (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 5) and that groups are not able to typically elaborate or bring to conscious conversation. These issues are ordinarily neither articulated through the questioning route, nor hypothesized for attribution, but rather arise as a new insight, borne not of what was asked, but what was either found to be important by the participants, or that emerges from the underlying individual, social, or cultural issues touched upon by what was asked.

This data touches on the larger themes and unifying concepts that are invisible before the study begins but that offer explanatory power for events related by the group. Emergent themes will include those that have not been hypothesized, the unasked questions that seem to be addressed in the stories, anecdotes, explanations, and conversations among participants. A strength of the focus group method is the capacity to uncover the unique experiential data that determines the complexity of social situations.

Emergent data may also involve larger explanations for articulated attitudes, opinions, or beliefs, or that may address the dynamics of the group or discussion topics. While some of this interplay is visible to the participants, there is also that insight drawn from the relationship of the participants and the ideas they generate that extends beyond their casual awareness.

For example, in a series of focus groups conducted with public high school students regarding school violence (Massey, unpublished), the articulated question asked for descriptions of their personal experiences with violence. Students easily recounted their stories as both victims and witnesses of harassment. An unexpected finding, however, was that while bullying and teasing regularly occurred, what also emerged was a sense of complacency and inevitability regarding bullying. This theme emerged even
though students had not been asked about indifference to school violence on their own or on the part of their fellow students. A potentially rich area for future research might be the degree to which this hypothesized tendency is real, and if so, its impact on efforts to reduce violence in schools.

6.1. Strengths and limitations of emergent data

Emergent data provides the richest form of qualitative data for analysis, and also holds the greatest opportunity for misapplication and interpretation. The strength of emergent data is the capacity it has to allow us to come to a greater understanding of those often unspoken social and normative values that underlie our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. What we gain is the chance to explore those meanings and interpretations that move beyond our preconceived theories and propositions and that allow us to anchor knowledge of social and psychological processes in the norms and experiences of the population (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Emergent data is also closely associated with the interactions among participants, and the unique aspects of the group process (Wibeck et al., 2007).

One potential limitation of emergent data is its more tentative foundation. As we move from more theory-driven to more data-driven, or inductive, analyses, we decrease the likelihood of consistency in judgment (Boyatzis, 1998). At each level, it is incumbent on the researcher to establish the veracity of the interpretation by demonstrating the sources of data that lead to the researchers’ conclusions. This is perhaps simplest in the use of articulated data. We may report that in response to this question, respondents answered thus. Similarly, when specific research questions or hypotheses have been identified a priori, comparisons may be described and exemplary comments applied. We will have far less evidence to bolster the interpretations of emergent themes. Emergent data involves inferring attitudes, motivations, and perspectives that are unvoiced, or incompletely voiced. The analyst must make the case that the dialog has been interpreted accurately. As a result, emergent themes in the evaluation context are subject to further replication and verification.

A related limitation is due to the ‘indeterminacy’ of data (Frankland & Bloor, 2001, p. 153). These authors suggest focus group data contain many instances of unfinished speech and incomplete ideas. This indeterminacy contributes to the more tentative nature of emergent themes. Shorter and less complex data sets also place limitations on coding opportunities (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Unfortunately, indeterminacy cannot be completely excluded from focus groups, nor does the process lend itself to resolution of these unfinished ideas. On occasion, the focus group moderator may have the opportunity to explore themes that arise in the conversation in order to gain a greater understanding of the statements. However, the scope of the focus group may not allow exploration of all the comments with potential interpretive value, particularly those that seem tangential to the primary purpose of the group. In addition, emergent themes may only show themselves after the transcripts are analyzed. The difficulty is not in finding new themes in the expressions of the participants, but rather in finding sufficient and consistent data to justify drawing conclusions about these themes.

This problem is exacerbated in most evaluation oriented focus groups where the groups are convened only once, are time limited, and seldom involve the recursive methods associated with other qualitative techniques. Thus the constraints of the method may foreclose a complete explication of emergent themes. Emergent data will be the most difficult to extract and interpret from the information obtained in the group setting. As a result, success in interpreting emergent data depends on greater trust in the analysis.

Finally, it is a mistake to believe that every transcript or exchange contains some larger story or emergent theme that offers new insight beyond what is articulated by the participants regarding their experiences. Moderators have probably experienced both group and individual interview situations where there was simply ‘nothing going on.’ Whether due to a failure to engage the participant(s), their confusion, lack of knowledge, disinterest in the topic, or some other cause, interviews may provide an adequate reflection of the participants thoughts and observations about the questions of interest, but offer nothing to a greater understanding of the implications of their experiences. It is a mistake to attempt to craft emergent themes on the presumption that they must be there.

7. Relationship among the levels of data

An analysis of a focus group data should neither confuse nor conflate information arising from each level of analysis. While it might be tempting to propose that data from all sources serves to offer some encompassing, consistent message, there is no certainty that information will provide a consistent single story from the participants. The juxtaposition of information available at the three levels offers insight into the complex meaning of experiences. Group members may articulate implementation of a new policy, but fail to describe the use of procedures that would be hypothesized to support such services. The data sources are separate, and thus when they coincide, offer reassurance that we have heard a consistent story. When data diverge, it may tell us something very different about the issues at hand.

Second, the data should not be considered equivalent in its ease of interpretation. Articulated data is the most relevant for the questions asked and requires the least interpretation from the researcher. It is the least ambiguous data set, and has the greatest ‘face validity’ (Anastasi, 1988). If we have asked the right questions (and in the right way), articulated data should provide the best answers to those questions. However, the qualitative method presumes that we do not always know the correct questions, or all the right questions, and the degree to which we miss the pertinent issues, the more likely any gain that we achieve will occur through attributional or emergent data.

Attributional data is more difficult to interpret. Attributional data requires a more explicit description of propositions or hypotheses that may then be tested against evidence provided in the participants’ commentary. The evaluator has the advantage, however, of being able to control group membership, construct the discussion guide, and shape the conversation among participants, in order to increase opportunities for attributional data to emerge.

Emergent data covers that broad territory that includes the exposition of new, more subtle themes of which both participants and researchers may be only partly aware. We are most likely to have only partial, tentative, support for emergent themes. Because of the relatively short duration of most focus groups, there may be few opportunities to identify emergent themes, and these themes may have the least supporting documentation in either direct quotes or notes from the moderator. Further, the value of the insights gained from emergent data rests with the utility of the insight for the purposes of the evaluation. Interesting insights may be of unknown relevance for evaluation purposes.

Third, it is not proposed that articulated and attributional data are purely deductive, while emergent data is purely inductive. Attributional data is more likely to be deductive by design, as we will likely have some propositional framework by which to test our hypotheses. We will generally expect to test some planned contrast even if the exact nature of the evidence of that contrast is unknown. The evaluator may still find value in inductive coding of themes that arise in hypothesized contrasts. The thematic
analysis of articulated and emergent data will likely be a blend of both inductive and deductive processes, with emergent data most clearly inductive.

Finally, it is not proposed that one level of analysis is superordinate to another. The purpose of the evaluation should determine the relative reliance on each level of data. From the utilization perspective (Patton, 1997), the evaluator may come to emphasize one source of data over another based on the purposes of the evaluation. Judgment oriented evaluations may require a different data emphasis (perhaps hypothesis testing), than those intended for the generation of new knowledge that might concentrate on emergent data (Chelimsky, 1997). Evaluators have the opportunity to make their intentions explicit and thus identify the kind of data they anticipate will be most relevant for their purpose.

8. Practical applications and guidelines

It should be clear from the previous discussion that preparation for focus group analysis should not be an entirely post-hoc event. The simplest guideline is to plan the focus group based on the specific needs of the evaluation and where the most relevant data is likely to be found. The construction of the guide and the questions, probes, and prompts offered by the moderator should reflect the purpose of the effort. The composition and number of groups will be partly determined by any tests of attributional if-then propositions. Questions and prompts must be developed to shape conversation to the questions and contrasts of interest for the evaluation.

For example, if a primary concern is gaining a greater understanding of how participants experience stigma, then an emphasis on articulated data would suggest the use of a direct question, perhaps as simple as “Tell me about your experience with stigma,” or “How would you define stigma?” In answering this question participants may offer a definition that fits their understanding and experience, relate a story or instance that they feel illustrates what stigma is, or expand on another’s definition. The themes that arise from this direct question will center on the forms and kinds of stigma and the personal experiences that illustrate their definition of the term. It behooves the evaluator to assess and report on the themes that arise as a result of and in relation to the questions and probes that were asked.

An evaluator who wishes to test the hypothesis that family members experience stigma differently than consumers, must establish the format of the focus group(s) to allow these contrasts to occur. An obvious approach would be to have different focus groups with family members and consumers, ask each group the same questions, and contrast the ways that they differentially characterize what stigma is. Do the same issues arise? Are terms similar? If distinctions are promulgated across several groups of both family members and consumers, we might deduce certain fundamental differences in the way the groups define and experience stigma. A less certain approach would be to attempt to distinguish differences within a group based on the role of the respondent. Unfortunately, even complete transcripts are confounded by unidentified speakers, and group dynamics are likely operating which would prevent us from confidently distinguishing between differences in opinion and differences in emphasis. Group members may acknowledge a different perspective without endorsing it, with the difference hard to distinguish in the ensuing transcripts.

These examples may be contrasted with a situation where members of the group digress or expand the question of interest and broach other topics. A participant may propose that stigma is less relevant than some other issue such as ‘acceptance.’ Depending on the vagaries of the group, this notion of acceptance may be reiterated and expanded upon by other members of the group, acknowledged and then forgotten, or ignored. The moderator may, or may not have the time, inclination, or awareness to pursue a more thorough discussion of this new idea. The moderator may choose to explore the new concept to see how the definition fits with stigma, or may fail to catch the potential relevance of the new term. In analysis, the moderator is then faced with the decision to ignore this new idea (as it is not consistent with the expressed emphasis on stigma), interpret and report it as an alternative to or variation of stigma, or consider its relevance as a potential emergent idea. There may be sufficient discussion among group members for the analyst to conclude that this is an emergent theme that may have special significance and should be investigated more thoroughly as uniquely contributing to the experience of consumers. From its relation to the articulated questions and prompts it should be clear that this is a new concept or unique interpretation. This is fundamental theory generation.

Emergent data may also be revealed in unspoken assumptions that arise as part of other conversation. As the earlier example noted (Massey, unpublished), none of the student participants spoke of personal indifference or desensitization directly, nor were there any questions directly asking about their acceptance of bullying as the normal course of student experience. Yet the concept seemed to permeate the comments of the group. Careful analysis should distinguish these partially revealed themes from those that are firmly grounded in the questions and answers of articulated data. To ignore them is to lose one of the potentially valuable products of the evaluation based focus group, while to fail to distinguish them from articulated themes grounded in the discussion guide may do disservice to distinctions in specificity, completeness, and foundation.

9. Summary/conclusions

Focus groups offer an opportunity to obtain significant insight regarding the experiences, observations and opinions of group members. If a participant articulates an attitude, belief, or opinion, makes an observation, or relates an experience as part of a focus group discussion, there is something of value in that articulation. The evaluator has information that was not available before. And the summary of the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the participants, taken in the larger context with the statements of others, can provide critical new insights and lead to a greater understanding of the topics of interest.

Previous research suggests that informal and sometimes poorly described forms of thematic analyses are the most common means of data reduction of focus groups. This paper has presented a simple model to clarify this process. The analysis of the latent data emerging from focus groups may be interpreted at three levels, each offering different kinds of insights regarding individual and group experiences. The exposition of each of these levels of data allows the researcher greater clarity in relating the findings of focus group research, and allows the reader a better understanding of the kinds of conclusions and evidence that might be expected from such an analysis. It is suggested that distinguishing among three levels of data serve to increase the specificity and transparency of the data analysis process, and will serve to increase evaluation consumers understanding, appreciation, and faith in the conclusions drawn from such analysis.

References

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