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Validity Issues in the Application of Selected Qualitative Social Research Methods

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Abstract

This paper investigated the validity concerns in the application of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and One-on-one Qualitative Interviews as forms of qualitative social research methods with the objective of unraveling the validity concerns embedded in their application. In order to reach this objective, the effectiveness of qualitative social research methods – FGDs and One-on-one Qualitative Interviews – is put on the line by empirically comparing and contrasting data from two FGD sessions and one-on-one interviews to ascertain the consistency in terms of data retrieved from participants using these two data collection methods. The study is guided by the hypothesis that data obtained via FGDs may be influenced by groupthink rather than individual participant's perspectives. A critical scrutiny of the data that emanated from the two organized FGDs departed quite significantly from the data that was elicited from the one-on-one qualitative interviews. The difference in responses confirms that FGDs are not fully insulated from the shackles of groupthink. It is recommended, among others, that though FGD can stand unilaterally as a research methodology for non-sensitive topics with no direct personal implications for participants; researchers should be encouraged to adopt FGD in league with other methods in a form of triangulation or mixed methodological approach for a more quality data, bearing in mind the central role occupied by data in the social scientific research process.

Key Words: Focus Group Discussion, One-on-One Qualitative Interview, Social Research Methodology, Qualitative Data, and Groupthink.

Introduction

Validity is critical in research as a means of integrity assurance in the research process through the synchronization of research findings, data and its sources in order to make research real and authentic. Validity therefore ensures that researchers apply methods in research in a way that findings accurately reflect the data informing the research (Long & Johnson, 2000). Qualitative research methods have been applauded for its thoroughness in terms of validity over quantitative research methods. This viewpoint is generally held because qualitative researchers place the participant at the centre of research which seems to authenticate the data from the perspective of the participant as compared to

quantitative researchers who do the opposite by placing themselves rather at the centre of data elicitation, thus raising possible issues regarding its validity.

However, merely placing the participant at the centre of qualitative research does not necessarily guarantee validity because qualitative researchers may not be transparent with their analytical procedures and findings being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to the researcher's bias (Rolfe, 2006; Smith & Noble, 2014). Moreover, participants may also be influenced by others when providing data to researchers. This implies that the comparative advantage qualitative research has over quantitative research in terms of validity may be problematic because many researchers overlook the validity concerns embedded in the application of qualitative research methods and how these concerns can be minimized in ensuring enhanced research credibility. This paper takes up this challenge to interrogate validity concerns in the application of FGDs and one-on-one interviews as forms of qualitative social research methods with the objective of unraveling the validity concerns embedded in their application as a conduit in proposing some feasible ways of addressing these concerns. This is critical in order to address possible biases embedded in qualitative research to make it more valid and credible.

FGD, which is also referred to as group interviewing, is essentially a qualitative research method. It offers qualitative researchers the opportunity to interview several participants systematically and simultaneously (Babbie, 2011). FGD is applauded and widely used in social research mainly because of its strength of convenience, economic advantage, high face validity, and speedy results (Krueger, 1988). Many authors also subscribe to the notion that FGD is advantageous because of its purposeful use of social interaction in generating data which distinguishes it from other qualitative research methods like the one-on-one interview (Merton et al., 1990; Morgan, 1996). Despite the popularity of FGD, it is fraught with some flaws including the less control it offers to researchers in the interview process (Krueger, 1994). Further, it is susceptible to the dangers of groupthink that may pose on participants' reactions, which can significantly impact on the validity outcome of studies.

In this article, the efficacy of FGD as a data collection method is put on the line by empirically comparing and contrasting data from FGDs and one-on-one interviews to ascertain the consistency in terms of data retrieved from participants. The study is premised on the assumption that data obtained by FGD may be influenced by groupthink rather than participants' perspectives. This study is critical for many reasons. First, the fact that qualitative social research has gained much momentum recently implies that methods supporting this research design should be constantly evaluated as a critical step in adding to their qualities. The second reason is to evaluate the quality of FGD in a way different from the conventional assessment format generally based on its constitution involving group formation, discussion settings, numerical strength of groups, general motivation, and quality of facilitation/moderation. Granted that no research method is perfect, efforts need to be made periodically in appraising social methods in order to design feasible ways of improving upon their use in informing research. This is critical because the value of social research, no doubt, dwells mainly on quality data. There is dearth of literature on the evaluation of social research methods, hence the need to contribute in filling this void through this study.

Further, this study is particularly important given the fact that the classical debate between the positivists' and the hermeneutics' still lingers on in spite of their almost perpetual existence in the methodological orientation in the social sciences. Many social scientists have concluded that the debate is over with the two methodological orientations - quantitative and qualitative research designs - by the positivists' and the hermeneutics' respectively, featuring prominently in social scientific studies. The fact is that the debate is far from over. The traditional dimension of the debate based on the respective strength of the two methodological orientations though is extensively resolved, a new twist has emerged and this time dwelling on the scientific credibility of the two methods particularly

the more recent and evolving of the two orientations being the qualitative approach. This is in spite of the recent significant patronage of mixed methodology or triangulation in the social sciences. Admirers of the two respective methodologies are still holding firm to the belief that their respective perspectives have more scientific credibility than the other. Qualitative approach has found itself more at the receiving end of credibility condemnation because of the paucity of clear analytical procedures, elicitation and discussion of data. It is in this light that this study aims at appraising the most popular of the qualitative methods – FGDs and one-on-one interviews – in order to understand more scientific logic the validity concerns embedded in their application in social research and how they can be addressed to add to the numerous scientific advantages associated with their use.

Potential Impact of Groupthink on the Outcome of Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Groupthink is a psychological observable fact that occurs within groups of people. It is the manner of thoughts that happens when the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overshadows a pragmatic appraisal of alternatives (Janis, 1972). The inference here is that group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative perspectives (Turner et al., 1998). Most of the initial research on groupthink was performed by Irving Janis. He first defined the term as a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' quest for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action (Janis, 1972). Following Janis, other studies have attempted to reformulate the groupthink model. Notable among them include Hart, who developed a concept of groupthink as premised upon collective optimism and collective avoidance (Hart, 1998). McCauley (1989) in looking at the relationship between social influence and decision-making pointed to the tremendous impact of conformity and compliance in groups decisions. This implies that focus groups as scientifically constituted social interaction fora are vulnerable to this tremendous impact of conformity and compliance in their decisions.

The principal social cost of groupthink, however, is the loss of individual creativity, uniqueness, and independent thinking (Turner et al., 1998). Whether groupthink occurs in a situation is largely a subjective perception (Schafer, 1996). But it is undeniable the fact that groupthink has the potential to impact on reactions from individuals in group situations. Groups are, without a doubt, cogent social force capable of wielding significant influence on decision-making. They can sometimes encourage individuals to conform to behaviours and actions that they would otherwise not engaged in. Famous classical experimentations by Milgram (1963; 1965); Asch (1958) amply reveal the tremendous impact that groupthink may have on individual behaviour and action when in a group situation. Focus group discussions are therefore not insulated from the possible force that groups wield on individual's perceptions, reactions, and decisions when put together with others in a discussion.

Method of Study

A social experimentation approach was adopted in order to place FGD under the microscope. Two FGDs were organized on relationship between stress, domestic violence, and perceived health. Two groups of six women per each from a Ghanaian University were constituted to deliberate on the issue. Women constituted the unit of analysis because of their overrepresentation as victims of domestic violence with its perceived impact on their health status in the country (Boateng, 2017; Boateng, 2017). Their responses were noted in the FGDs. This was followed up with one-on-one qualitative interviews with the same participants. These interviews were based on the same theme but couched a little bit differently in a form similar to the test-retest approach.

The rationale was to ascertain if the responses from the FGDs departed significantly from that of the one-on-one qualitative interviews. This was done to check if groupthink had any influence on the responses that emanated from the two FGDs. The problem with this approach, however, was ensuring

that the differences in the responses from the groups and the one-on-one interviews, if any, was attributable to groupthink. The limitation was how to control for potential sources of spuriousness between the variables groupthink and individual responses in FGDs. A way of counteracting the possible spuriousness between the independent and dependent variables entailed in the study was to ensure that there was a reasonable period between the FGDs and the one-on-one interview sessions.

Discussion of Findings

A critical scrutiny of the data that emanated from the two organized FGDs departed quite significantly from the data that was elicited from the one-on-one qualitative interviews.

The participants in the FGDs were quite economical with their responses, evidently holding on to information. Regarding the issue on the relationship between family stress, domestic violence and perceived health, the FGD participants pointed out patriarchy as the major source of stress within the family leading to domestic violence on many occasions with its attendant health implications for women within the families, with children becoming both primary and secondary victims of domestic violence. Engagement in extra-marital activities, communication and financial issues and incompatible parental styles were some of the other factors cited as triggers or sources of family stress and domestic violence with their ultimate toll on the health of women and children. Reliance on extended families, friends, and associations such as churches were also mentioned as the main forms of support available to women in dealing with family stress and stressors associated with domestic violence. Evidently, the FGD participants stayed away from sharing intimate experiences regarding sources of family stress, domestic violence and their perceived impact on their health.

The converse was the case regarding the one-on-one qualitative interviews, where the participants generally opened up and shared intimate experiences pertaining to family stress, domestic violence and their perceived impact on their health. Many demonstrated emotions recounting their experiences particularly with regards to physical and emotional abuses they had gone through over the years. The one-on-one qualitative interviews clearly generated richer and in-depth data than the FGDs, which though generated useful data but without much details. This certainly raises questions about the validity of data elicited via FGDs.

A number of inferences can be made out of the above revelation. Prominent inference is the confirmation that FGDs are not fully insulated from groupthink. This, however, may be attributed to many external variables as well, including the overall organization, constitution, composition, and even the participants' motivation during the FGD session. Consequently, to control for any spuriousness in the relationship between the variables - groupthink and differences in results - the participants were made to recall their experiences in the FGDs after the one-on-one qualitative interviews. Few participants indicated that they never felt pressurized being part of the FGDs. A participant has this to say:

I knew two members in my group, but felt relaxed during the discussion session. The views I expressed during the discussion session were purely mine and will stand by it if there is to be another discussion (Participant 4).

However, most participants felt shy to delve deeper into their experiences because they did not know the other participants and for that matter could not entrust them with details about their private lives. This is demonstrated in this comment by a participant.

Though I was comfortable in the discussion, I never felt comfortable in opening up too much on my private life regarding my situation on stress and domestic violence. I felt this were too private to share. So I was economical with my

reactions because I could not trust the members in the group whom I did not know anyway (Participant 1).

It is believed that the "hold back" attitude of the participants primarily accounted for the disparity found in the two data sets. At best, sensitive social topics, like the one used for this study, with direct personal implications for participants should not be premised upon FGD to forestall its potential adverse impact on participants' responses. The fact that most of the participants could not open up with their experiences in relation to the subject/themes implied that they had to concur and conform to the experiences of the few who could open up in order to fit into the group's orientation. Evidently, FGD in spite of its widely acclaimed popularity as a social research method because of its convenience and economical usage may have its outcome adversely affected by groupthink.

On the contrary, FGDs can also provide necessary enlightenment and conceptual platform to educate participants more on non-sensitive social topics to enable them relate well to it, and not necessarily be swayed or influenced by groupthink. FGDs can motivate participants, suggesting different dimensions and nuances of the original problem that individual participants might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion (Rubin et al., 1995). It is therefore no surprise the fact that researchers hold different opinions as to the amount of agreement needed within a group to conclude the occurrence of groupthink in social research outcome (Schafer et al., 1996). That said, caution has to be exercised in ensuring that groupthink does not take away the individuality, uniqueness, and independent thinking expected of participants engaged in qualitative social research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The fact remains that though all research methodologies do have some rough edges to it, it is important the respective negativities rendering them not fully functional are identified and addressed so as to yield quality data, which invariably defines the outcome of scientific research. Identifying groupthink as a potential danger to the outcome of FGD is therefore a step in the right direction.

The following recommendations are worth considering in improving the efficacy of FGD as a social research method rooted in social interaction. Though FGD can stand unilaterally as a social research method for a study, it is recommended that where researchers have the resources they should be encouraged to adopt FGD in league with other methods in a form of triangulation and mixed methodological approach. Facilitators or moderators should always remind themselves of the potential dangers that groupthink may pose on the outcome of FGD by ensuring fair distribution of opportunities to all participants to voice out their perspectives. FGD participants' voluntary assumption of leadership roles and overly assertiveness should be professionally discouraged. Individual participants in FGD should be discouraged as much as possible from imposing their respective ideas on others in order not to influence or dictate indirectly the outcome of responses.

The constitution and composition of FGD as a homogeneous group, though difficult to be realistically attained always, should be strived for by FGD organizers to place all participants on the same pedestal. This will aid in counteracting unnecessary influence other participants may have on their colleagues during the FGD session. Another way of minimizing the potential impact of groupthink on FGD is to adopt the extended focus group technique. This entails a brief administration of interviews with participants prior to the FGD itself. The interviews basically include materials to be discussed at the FGD. Such interactions enable participants to develop a commitment to a stance or perspective prior to the FGD, so the group does not easily sway them. The extended focus group can also come after the real FGD to minimize the impact the exposure to some of the discussed questions prior to the real FGD may pose on participants' reaction in the group session. In the post FGD situation an administration of a brief interview is offered to participants to capture their summary or overall views

on the subject/theme discussed. Such a follow-up interview will also offer participants another opportunity to express views they could not expressed in the earlier discussion, or clarify further on points or stance already expressed. This, surely, can impact positively on the quality of the data. The disadvantage here though is that some participants who have already been overly influenced by the group may still be stuck to the group's orientation. Further, it can be time consuming, which actually is not a major problem given the quality of data to be generated via the extended FGD.

Organizers of FGD as a tool for qualitative field research need to be mindful that not all social qualitative topics lend themselves for the application of FGD. Studies on sensitive topics with personal implications for participants should not be premised on FGD. This is because participants may struggle or become hesitant to share with a third party for fear of stigmatization, breaking of confidentiality, and trust. Social research topics being studied should therefore be taken into serious cognizance in the selection of FGD as a qualitative research method.

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