

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups as a research tool...



This essay is going to analyse the use of focus groups as a research method in modern day social sciences.

The disadvantages and the advantages will be discussed, and furthermore the use of focus groups as a research method against using other research methods will be evaluated. A case study will also be reviewed in order to describe the use of focus groups; furthermore the case study would be critically discussed in order to reflect on the success or the failure of the study. Using this case study, a dissertation topic will be written about; the dissertation topic that one has chosen is how Muslim women keep in touch with British culture as well as their own Islam culture when there are so many contradictions between the two. A focus group is becoming a more common technique in order to interview participants, they have been used in market research since the 1920s (Basch, 1987), and they were also used to gauge the public's morale during world war two, by Merton (Merton and Kendall, 1955). It was here that the term " focussed interview" was coined and ever since they have become more and more frequent in the social sciences.

The group is classed as focus as they do an activity together, such as discuss issues or read a magazine for example. However, the main aim of this technique is to see the interaction between participants and thus it is a useful tool in interviewing. Also, one other aspect of focus groups is that not only do they gauge the interaction between participants but also the observer can oversee " collective remembering" as shown by a study partaken by Kitzinger. He explored how people talked about AIDs by using participants who knew each other, through this he was able to see the

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interactions as they naturally would, or “naturally occurring data” (Kitzinger, 1994: 105). Therefore, focus groups are an important tool for gathering data in the field of social sciences.

Also a focus group is more than a group interview “because of the community of interest shared by the group and the use of participants’ interaction as research data.” (Burton, 2000) Focus groups are used to produce quantitative data but more often than not they are used to produce qualitative data. Quantitative research is when one collects evidence using numeric facts and figures. These will generally be analysed by the use of statistic techniques as opposed to qualitative research.

This is when evidence is collected through opinions or points of view. As focus groups are discussions and opinions about certain research topics, they serve the purpose of providing in depth information rather than figures of data, also these are not quantifiable (Suler, 1995), as would be the case in qualitative research. Also for focus groups, the interpretation or analysis of this method occurs through a number of different approaches such as content analysis (Remenyi, 1996). This is opposed to qualitative research where example include case studies, surveys and evaluation research which produce quantifiable data. There are many advantages to focus groups.

According to the American Statistical Association (1997), focus groups do not involve complicated sampling methods once one has the data; this is opposed to surveys where one must select a representative sample of the entire population. When one uses focus groups, only a planned sample is needed and the demographic of the sample that one has chosen is a method

of focussing the outcome of the picked focus group. Also, focus groups are relatively cheap compared to other methods of interviewing or participant based observations. Therefore, one of the advantages of focus groups is that complicated sampling methods are not needed as in the case for other research methods and that they are relatively cheap compared to other methods as well. There are other advantages to using focus groups as well, one such advantage of using focus group as a method is research is that this method can be tailored to the level of detail that is needed.

The structure and detail can be tailored due to the fact that this method's moderator can ask the participants to discuss issues and also the questions can be vague or very specific depending on what is wanted. This can be done in order to interpret responses and the participants' overall views on a topic (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). This therefore makes it possible for a thorough analysis to be done for the results. However this also makes it possible for contradictions to occur but through this as a research method, one can distinguish the reasons for why that possibly can happen. Therefore, in conclusion, another possible advantage for focus groups are that they can be tailored to whatever the moderator wants and it provides data that can be explained easier than other research methods in the social sciences. There are other advantages to using focus groups as well.

For example a wide range of information can be gathered in a short time span compared to other research methods. This is mostly because of the use of open ended questions and the moderator's ability to explore a range of related topics (American Statistical Association, 1997). According to Gibbs, focus groups are particularly suited to obtaining several perspectives on a <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-using-focus-groups-as-a-research-tool/>

topic simultaneously (Gibbs, 1997). Also, during focus groups, individuals are more likely to produce candid responses as opposed to what they might say for example during an interview, as this is a discussion in a group rather than a one on one interview and also participants can build on each others ideas and comments, this is very useful to a moderator analysing the focus group as it provides ample opportunity to explore new or unique perspectives which may come up in conversation during the discussion between the participants. Finally, focus groups can be useful for identifying participants' needs, say for example if it is for a product, it can be useful to see what the participants one has selected really feel and need. In conclusion, there are many advantages for focus groups, they can gather a lot of data quickly and because participants can build upon ideas, new perspectives can be brought about and they are more likely to be truthful responses as opposed to other research methods, which is useful for the moderator and thus a useful tool of research in the social sciences.

On the other hand, there are many disadvantages to focus groups as well. The data that is produced during a focus group is mostly qualitative, however what the participants said and how they behaved is much more important to the moderator than the quantitative analysis that is created. This is compared to other research methods, for example interviews where what the answers are that are produced are more important to how the participant behaved. Also, a lot of qualitative data is produced which may be difficult to analyze, compared to other research methods where for example quantitative data is produced which could be statistically analysed easily. Furthermore, because a non-random sampling method is used, this limits the

possible statistical analysis and also it means that the results can not be generalised (American Statistical Association, 1997). In conclusion, there are disadvantages to using focus groups as a research method, one such example is the data produced can be really hard to analyze and in some cases less significant than how the participants behaved during the actual focus group discussion.

There are other disadvantages to using focus groups as well. Gibbs states that there are limitations in how the method is actually done (Gibbs, 1997). A focus group could be hard to put together as this method involves discussion and participant interaction which in turn could discourage participants that are inarticulate or unconfident. Also, during the focus group discussion, outspoken individuals may dominate the discussions and therefore a fair view of the whole group may not be taken.

Furthermore, the group nature of the method means that a confidentiality of responses is available so therefore in the case of a participant wanting to remove his or her comments from the discussions, it may be very hard to take it out of context. This is because separating an individual view from the collective response can be complicated, this is because individual responses are influenced by group responses therefore taking it out of context may make the discussions slightly out of sync. Also, as with interviews, the quality of the data that is produced is influenced by the moderator who is facilitating the focus group. Therefore, the quality of the discussion and usefulness of it depends on skill of facilitator. Lastly, focus groups are by their very nature open ended and flexible, and thus the moderator cannot predetermine the outcome (Mansell, 2004). In conclusion, there are many disadvantages to <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-using-focus-groups-as-a-research-tool/>

using focus groups, such as the actual method is flawed and in certain cases can make the experiment out of sync.

Finally, the usefulness of the data and the quality of the discussions is down to the moderator which can be a pitfall for using focus groups as a tool of participant observation for research in the social sciences. The paper that is chosen to be summarised is “ Using focus groups to develop contingent valuation scenarios- a case study of women’s groups in rural Nepal. ” It is by Josephine Borghi, Daya L. Shrestha, Deepa Shrestha and Stephen Jan.

This paper shows a case study for which focus groups were used to develop a survey to value a women’s group intervention in rural Nepal. The focus groups were used to determine an appropriate sum of money that could be asked for as contributions and what could be asked for as a contribution. For the focus groups, there were three stakeholder groups from which a series of focus group discussions were conducted. This study was taken with the aim in mind of improving birth outcomes in rural Nepal It ran monthly meetings designed to encourage women to share experiences, problems of pregnancy and childbirth. This lead to each group discussing a strategy; these included, the initiation of an emergency loan fund for mother and child health, use of stretchers, locally produced clean home delivery kits and the screening of awareness raising videos.

Picture cards were used, what these were, were small hand held pictorial cards that were used to help women match problems and solutions. Apart from focus groups, interviews were held as well, to help identify pregnancies and monitor birth outcomes, these were implemented over 33months. In

conclusion, the starting point for using focus groups as a research method was to help women in rural Nepal to improve birth outcomes, during pregnancy and childbirth. The sample size was chosen for the focus groups on the basis of their participation of the meetings that were held. The first group consisted solely of people that attended the meetings, the second group of people were women that had not attended the meetings and the third stakeholder group was the husbands of these women chosen.

The areas were chosen on the basis of security and how easily accessible they were as this study was taken in rural Nepal. The moderators that were chosen were two female field researchers and they both received training, one moderated the groups, transcribed the group discussions and translated the scripts from Nepali to English. The other moderator built rapport up with the participants and tape recorded the sessions. The participants were reminded of the activities that they had done, for example the small hand held pictorial cards, also the focus group that attended the meetings were asked why they attended in order to gauge the benefits they thought they would achieve by partaking in the meetings.

The focus group containing the women participants that did not attend the meetings were asked why they did not attend the meetings; this was done in order to gauge what disadvantages the participants thought were if they did attend the meetings, photographs were used by the moderators in order to help gauge what the advantages and disadvantages were. Therefore in conclusion, what these focus groups hoped to achieve was to help women in rural Nepal in birth issues and see what further help they needed. The

groups consisted of women that attended the meetings that were held
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initially, women that did not attend the meetings and the husbands of these women. The focus groups showed a lot of things, most of which that were positive. The overall view from the focus groups showed that there were no disadvantages to attending the meetings, for example a woman that did attend the meetings stated, “ If we have not learnt as before lots of women will die, newborns will die.

Now we have learnt how we need to take care of pregnant women and what are the precautions and solutions. Even women that did not attend the meetings understood the benefits of the meetings, “ Even if I do not go [to the meetings] they will learn and if I need anything I can ask them. ” The main benefits that came across from the discussions ranged from the additional knowledge that was gained from the meetings, being able to actually share their knowledge with others to helping health and reducing illnesses. Even the male participants responded positively mostly due to the fact that their wives’ health was less at risk due to the fact of these meetings, “ It is regarding health. And I think health is the most important thing in life. ” Therefore, this focus group in particular came across as very advantageous; it helped the people that attended as through discussion it increased knowledge of the topic discussed.

The methods that were used were very useful in designed the survey tool and furthermore using focus groups, it helped to choose the key attributes to describe the women’s intervention for the rural women living in Nepal.

Therefore in conclusion, it was found that there were benefits to using focus groups for this study. It was found that using focus groups, it helped to use them as research for another research method, in this instance for using the <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-using-focus-groups-as-a-research-tool/>

survey. It was found in this study, for which all the qualitative methods contributed to the design of the survey – thus it was a very good research method. Also, through using focus groups, all the pre-existing notions that the meetings or the interventions would be regarded as negative were dismissed, for both the men and the women.

It was found, through this method of focus groups that the interventions were received highly positively. Also, using focus groups for this study, it was found that it was highly helpful to the moderators to help decide the choice of payments and what would be the appropriate sum of money to be asked for as a contribution, and furthermore how to ask in the first place. Thus, focus groups were very useful in this study. Furthermore, using focus groups also highlighted any confusion that could have come across for the surveys. Therefore, focus groups were very useful in this study, it helped in many ways, it helped avoid confusion and get rid of pre-existing notions. Also, it helped sort out the minor details needed for the survey, hence focus groups in this study was very important research method used as a pre- tool for the survey.

On the other hand, there were a lot of downsides to these focus groups. One main point that came across was that there was a lot of confusion regarding the contributions towards the group. The moderators had set up an emergency fund, to help all women locally, and however much people can put it in they put in. However, it was undecided over how it should be paid, it was finally decided that only money was accepted, but some people objected particularly from the poorer communities, “ people who can afford

money will give money, and people who cannot will give grains. " Therefore, this design was flawed.

Also, it was found that some participants were less willing to walk about their personal problems, and some discussions were led by the more confident participants. What this meant is that it was a discussion led by only a few people, therefore an overall view cannot be gauged if one only gets the views of a few participants. Also, the moderators were just field researchers rather than trained psychologists, therefore it cannot be said that they managed the group dynamics as well as they could have been done also it cannot be said that they were sensitive enough to the issues, this is one major disadvantage to this study. Also, it was found that the views that came across throughout all the focus groups were basically the same, by using such a constricted sample - it denied the way for new and not thought about perspectives to come across.

It would have been better to choose participants that were more used to outsiders so that " individual interviews may be more successful in gauging negative and marginal views. " So in conclusion, it can be said that the use of focus groups for this study should have been used along side other research methods, and therefore rather than substituting other conventional methods; it should rather compliment them. A further question that could be asked is whether running focus groups are the long term benefits in terms of improvement doing surveys, in this study it was found that the case was that it was not beneficial in the long term in order to find out answers to a survey like question. The topic that is being chosen for using focus groups as a research method is to see how Muslim women keep in touch with British
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culture as well as their own Islam culture when there are so many contradictions between the two.

The theoretical context behind is that in this growing world of segregation, how can a community that are seemingly more and more at loggerheads with each other stay together with so much tension. The idea that in such places as Bradford or other northern cities are breeding grounds for terrorism, it is a scary thought that they believe that they are alienated from the rest of the British culture, and with popular media such as the Sun newspaper and even films and games such as Assassins Creed bringing out old arguments such as the crusades, it is easily believed that these two cultures are more or less heading for a collision. Muslim women are chosen for this dissertation because in the Islam culture, it is broadly believed that they are considered as the lower class compared to the males. The aim of this experiment will be to try gauge what they believe are the reasons why they feel so alienated, if there are any, and also how do they deal with day to day life living with Britain being part of a culture that is coming under attack, for example from the media. Further objectives will be to try come across what other perspectives come about from group discussions, maybe how they feel about their position in their own culture.

Therefore in conclusion, my dissertation topic will be to see how can two seemingly opposite cultures work together when there are so many external factors bearing down on both. The methods that one envisages using for this topic are focus groups and a survey, the focus groups will be used as a pre-tool for a survey, to gauge what questions one can ask in the survey. For sampling methods, the groups of people that will be chosen will be married
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Muslim women from an age group of 25-30, married Muslim women from an age group of 30 onwards, single Muslim women from an age category of 18-24 and single Muslim women from an age category of 25 to 30. Married Muslim will be chosen because if the pre-conceived notion that they are believed to be the lesser half be true, then that means they will offer insight as to why and how do they deal with that, either that or one will be able to dismiss that pre-conceived notion via using this group. There are two different groups of married Muslim women as the younger group will be more likely to have been born in Britain and therefore more accustomed to British culture and the second more likely to be accustomed to Muslim culture. Single Muslim women from an age category of 18 to 24 will be chosen because if they are younger then they will have been more accustomed to British culture, seeing as most of them will be more than likely have been born here.

Single Muslim women from an age group of 25-30 will be chosen to counter the 18 to 24 group, as this will be a split group opinion wise. This is because a few of them will have been born in Britain, and some may have been born elsewhere, therefore bringing these two together will hopefully make it so that one can get better insight into how Muslim women keep in touch with British culture as well as their own Islam culture when there are so many contradictions between the two. Focus groups were chosen, as due to the discussion that takes part between the groups, and bringing in such an eclectic mix - new perspectives will hopefully arise, which will lead to new chain of thought as well as expanding and clearing up the question chosen. This is different compared to other methods, for example one on one

interviews where difficult questions are hard to ask and also hard to keep up a conversation when it is just between two people. Using focus groups as a research method, there are more than just two people talking, therefore a conversation can flow easier, also the moderator does not need to keep intervening as much as they might have to during a one on one interview. Also, compared to an ethnographic approach were there would be no moderator but rather an ethnographer mixing in, it is relatively cheaper and takes less time, using focus groups one can gather a lot of data in a relatively short period of time.

Therefore in conclusion, for this topic, using a focus group will be much more useful than using another method, the responses are more likely to be candid and also it is easier to do relative to how much qualitative data one gets for amount of work done as compared to other research methods in the social sciences. So focus groups will be much more useful compared to other methods that are available as a research method in the social sciences. However there will be a few ethical dilemmas, because this is a very sensitive topic, ethical approval must first be sought and also the women that will be invited to come, will be asked to come in the strictest of confidence. Therefore despite focus groups being an appropriate method for this subject, it still has some disadvantages. The people that will be invited to come to these focus groups will be Muslim women chosen from different target populations. The first of these will be will be married Muslim women from an age group of 25-30 and the second group will be married Muslim women from an age group of 30 onwards.

Furthermore, there will be two groups of single Muslim women, one an age group of 18 to 24 and another 25 to 30. One can predict that the younger age groups will be more vociferous in their opinions and within these groups it can be expected that the younger population will be more candid in their responses. In the married Muslim women groups, it is expected that it will be harder to elicit information, one will need to make sure that they will be reassured of confidentiality and also that their opinions can be removed from any further work done after these focus groups. There are many reasons for the rationality of choosing these groups. Firstly, because the topic statement in question is about Muslim women, one needs to have Muslim women being invited to join these focus groups.

There will be two different groups of married Muslim women, this is because the younger group will be more than likely to have been born in Britain, thus this means they will be more likely to be accustomed to British culture, furthermore the second group will be more than likely to be accustomed to Muslim culture. However, one of these aims is to see if these pre-conceived notions are real, so having these groups might show that the pre-conceived notions are completely wrong. Single Muslim women from an age category of 18 to 24 will be chosen because if they are younger then they will have been more accustomed to British culture; this is because most of them will be more than likely have been born here. Furthermore, single Muslim women from an age group of 25-30 will be chosen to counter the 18 to 24 group, as said previously, this will be a split group opinion wise and thus new insights will be brought about. This is because a few of them will have been born in Britain, and some may have been born elsewhere, therefore, hopefully new

opinions will arise to help understand how Muslim women keep in touch with British culture as well as their own Islam culture when there are so many contradictions between the two. The questions that will be asked will range from direct questions to areas of discussion.

The questions that will be asked will be mostly the same for each different focus group, however there will be questions specific targeted for each specific group. The general questions that will be asked are: •Being Muslim women, how religious or cultural do you think yourselves to be? •Living in Britain, do you feel that your religion or culture is targeted any way by the media? •If so, why do you feel that? •Have you ever experienced any discrimination of any kind, be it from other cultures or even your own culture? Do you go out socializing in areas where it may be a more British type environment, for example pubs or do you stick to your own cultural places? For each target group, some questions will vary. For the married Muslim women, these questions will be asked: •Do you believe that you have a fair part in married life? •If you have children, do you think they will be brought up with the same values as you were brought up with? •Do you think males and females are treated differently in married life? For the single Muslim women: Do you share the same values as your parents? •Being Muslim women, do you think life is segregated for you and the males of the same religion? For this type of topic, it might be easier to have an unstructured discussion, and ask questions when deemed appropriate. The question to break the ice initially however will be: •Being Muslim women, how religious or cultural do you think yourselves to be? Therefore in conclusion, there will be a lot of general questions for each focus group;

however there will be fixed target questions specific for each target groups. Newspaper articles will be used; the article attached (Appendix 1a) is about an honour killing which occurred in England, hopefully this will aid discussion about segregation in life between males and females.

Furthermore, a photograph of the woman shot in Afghanistan in the football stadium will be used to try further the conversation. These focus groups will follow a more unstructured pattern, as this is a sensitive topic therefore any information is valuable, if it is a fixed structure, some of the participants might be less willing to talk about some questions. In conclusion, there are many advantages to using focus groups, but also many disadvantages. Focus groups are easy to do, relatively cheap and also gather a lot of data in a relatively short time span. Also, for focus groups, participants are more likely to have candid responses, compared to other research methods for example one on one interviews.

They also provide a basis for which new perspectives can be found thus leading to new ideas which can be explored. This is because; the participants can build on each others ideas which can lead to unique ideas that may have not come up in other research methods. However, there are also some disadvantages. Focus groups need a trained moderator, as sensitive issues may need to be discussed and furthermore if conversation were to halt, the moderator needs to step in to carry on the discussion. Also, outspoken individuals may dominate the discussions, so an overall view of the group may not be able to be elicited.

Also, the findings that arise from focus groups cannot be generalized to the whole population as this is not a random sample, but rather a target sample population. Lastly, focus groups can generate a large amount of qualitative data, which in turn can be hard to analyse. Therefore in conclusions, focus groups are very useful as a research method, however rather than substituting it for another research method, it may be more useful to use focus groups to compliment another research method in the social sciences.

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