

Focus method Group and the Possibilities of its use as a Tool for Research in the Field of Social Work

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Abstract:

The Focus Group method is one of the few traditional methods used in qualitative research. There has been much debate in scientific circles about its suitability and the validity of the data it produces. This method was often seen as more of a complementary one. Currently, according to Miovský (2006), this research method is used in sociology and marketing research. The popularity of this method has increased in recent years, and when chosen for the right purpose, it can also bring good results.

The focus method group

In the late 1930s, researchers began to discover the advantages of indirect, i.e. non-directive, interviews. Morgan (2001) further describes that researchers began to have some doubts about the suitability of traditional techniques such as methods of obtaining information through questionnaire surveys. These were tools that would limit the respondent's answers. Thanks to this, science became interested in methods in which the researcher has a less directive and dominant role and the respondent has the opportunity to comment on individual topics more comprehensively. He further states that the earliest account of group interviews is Bogardus' 1926 article "The Groups Interview" published in the *Journal of Applied Sociology*.

The Focus Group technique as we know it today was developed in more detail in Merton and Kendall's (1946) study "The Focused Interview", when they used this method in researching the influence of the media on people's attitudes towards the participation of the United States in World War II. The method consisted in the gradual connection of stimuli during the conversation to topics and questions that interested the researcher. The researcher rarely asked the respondents direct and pre-prepared questions as characterized by Conradson (2005), who further states that he rather tried to direct the research participants to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences while listening to the radio inputs. Originally, participants in this research were asked to use buttons that reflected their responses to radio programs. They either responded positively or negatively by pressing the appropriate button. However, this type of data collection did not answer the questions of why the participants reacted negatively or positively to the given programs. It was therefore clear that this method was not sufficiently understood by the research participants. Public attention in the field of research has focused more on the unstructured and qualitative aspects of the participants and on the opinions expressed in their own words. In this way, as emphasized by Hendl (2023), the validity of the research results was ensured.

Interest in the use of these groups in the social-scientific field reappears at the beginning of the eighties. According to Bloor and Wood

(2006), the method began to be used in the field of marketing, market research strategies, advertising testing, consumer behavior and the commercial world. Various large companies have applied this method to improve their products. In recent years, researchers have begun to realize the possibilities of using the Focus Group method in academic research. Currently, we encounter two currents of using this method, namely academic and applied research.

Focus group as a qualitative research method

Focus Group is often cited as one of the most progressive qualitative methods for obtaining data (Miovský, 2006). It is a research tool for obtaining information on a chosen topic from groups that are characterized by shared characteristics or interests. A Focus Group focuses insight into the attitudes and beliefs that are the source of behavior. It is suitable for studying complex topics involving many levels of feeling and experience (Morgan, 2001). Focus Group is a qualitative research technique. It is based on group discussion, moderated by the researcher and uses group interaction. It is important to obtain data and insights from participants on a certain topic, which would be difficult to access outside the group. Hendl (1997) states that the Focus Group method is also referred to as a group interview, focus group or organized group discussion.

On the other hand, Hughes and Lang (2004) characterize that group interviews differ from focus groups in the form of discussion and specification and greater concreteness of the data obtained. Focus Group helps researchers gain knowledge about the perspectives and attitudes of people who have social problems.

Hague (2003) mentions the difference in the use of discussion groups in the USA and in Europe, where they primarily serve to get to the bottom of the matter and to understand the problem. Foret and Stávková (2003) are inclined to believe that the method is more suitable for preliminary research or for the final stage of interpretation and answering the question "why". Bers (1994) emphasizes that the method is relatively cheap, but not simple. But if it is implemented correctly, it is a powerful tool and supplement even for quantitative studies. To this,

Kotler and Keller (2007) add a warning about the necessary and thorough interpretation of the opinions of the group.

Use of the focus technique group in research in social work

Social work offers a wide scope for using the Focus Group technique. It is specific to social work that researchers orient and focus on determining the quality of the phenomenon under investigation, but also on what motivates respondents to use or not use social services. The goals of research in social work relate to the improvement of people's conditions. The purpose of research is to create applied knowledge, and research is used to develop knowledge and is used in practice (Krysik, Finn, 2010).

Research in social work, according to Rubin and Babbie (2010), focuses on providing scientifically based knowledge, evaluating or improving social services, social programs, procedures, interventions, assessing the needs of clients or a group of clients, evaluating the effects of social policy or solving specific social problems.

Hendl and Remr (2017) point out that we must not forget the immense help and effectiveness this method provides in obtaining opinions and feedback from clients, from professionals in the helping professions in social service facilities and from organizations. The Focus Group method helps to improve the services provided to clients and brings new innovations and modifications that respond to the needs of clients. Focus Group is currently used as a complementary method to help validate research data and interpret it. It is mainly used in combination with interviews with an individual, observation, or with a questionnaire technique.

A related technique, as stated by Chrátka (2016), is the so-called Delphi Group (a panel of experts), who repeatedly meet and discuss in order to create a common and authoritative opinion on a common topic. The authors Švaříček and Šedová (2014) state that the function of the Focus Group technique allows a detailed discussion of the problem and has a relatively small number of people. It focuses on specific areas of interest and allows participants to discuss the topic in a larger and more specific way.

Kostrub (2016) talks about the fact that Focus Groups have their own specific feature, which is the interaction of respondents in the group and the use of group dynamics. Some authors call this effect that occurs within the Focus Group as the snowball effect. This group interaction is commonly called the group effect. Group participants usually have common social experiences, age, social class, gender, ethnic origin, religion. Participants may also have a common area of interest such as motherhood, divorce, autism, abuse, mobbing, burnout.

Reasons for conducting a Focus Group

With techniques such as questionnaire surveys or face-to-face interviews, there is a basic assumption that the respondent really presents what he feels. However, people actually need to hear the opinions of other people in order to confirm their positions and thus be able to formulate their opinions. And this kind of interaction occurs when using a Focus Group (Chrátka, 2016).

The role of the Focus Group moderator is not dominant, on the contrary, the moderator makes it possible to promote both types of opinion, i.e. positive and negative. Conversely, negative opinions are often the most beneficial for the researcher. Disman (2021) further states that Focus Group participants are people who do not know each other, or do not know each other very well, but have some characteristics in common. They can be university students, professionals in helping professions, nurses, managers, IT specialists, librarians, etc.

However, these common characteristics, as argued by Eger and Egerová (2017, In: Gavora, 2010), do not oblige them to have the same opinions. In contrast, Kajanová et al. (2017, In: Švaříček, Šedová, 2014) states that there should not be people in the group who stand out in any way, for example in terms of education, age, etc. The moderator should always emphasize that the participants were invited based on the same experience to share their opinions on a certain matter and problem. The aim of the Focus Group is to reveal the attitudes and opinions of people who ideally do not know each other and at the same time, in one place, discuss the presented topic together.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Group

Sedova (2007, In: Patton, 2002) summarized some of the often mentioned advantages and limits of Focus Group use as follows:

Focus Group benefits include:

- Focus Group is a socially focused research technique. Humans are social creatures who interact and interact with other humans. They are influenced by the opinions of others and draw their own conclusions based on other opinions. Focus Groups take place in a natural environment, in real situations as opposed to controlled experimental situations, typical for quantitative studies.
- The Focus Group technique allows the moderator to experiment and observe unexpected situations, topics that would not appear in a questionnaire survey.
- Focus groups have high face validity, as this technique is easy to grasp and the results are understandable for those who use them. It also allows you to use quotes from respondents.
- The cost of a Focus Group is not very high.
- The Focus Group technique makes it possible to quickly achieve research results. In urgent cases, a trained moderator can conduct 3-4 group discussions, analyze them and write a research report within one week.

Disadvantages of Focus Group include:

- The researcher -moderator has less control in a group interview than in an individual interview. Participants can influence the focus of the discussion, so it is important for the moderator to keep a focused direction.
- Data taken with this technique are more demanding to analyze. Interactions in groups mean mutual influences. This must be taken into account in the interpretation.
- The Focus Group technique requires a very good and trained moderator who can recognize situations where it is necessary to move from one topic to another.
- Individual groups within one research may differ from each other. Each Focus Group may have different characteristics overall. One can be lethargic - boring, on the other hand, another can be energetic, where there can be ten-

sion. Because of these differences, we need to secure enough groups for research to maintain a balance of individual differences.

- It is challenging to form a group, invite participants, choose a suitable place for discussions, choose a time that will suit all participants.
- The discussion must take place in a place that is a good environment for conversations and discussions about the issue at hand.

Online Focus Group

Kotler et al (2007) states that the use and acceptance of modern information and communication technology in research is inevitable. Research in social work, whether qualitative or quantitative, discussions, solutions to social problems, will in the future be more confronted with the use of knowledge and the implementation of research using Internet technologies. Virtual discussions mainly support aspects of reducing the costs of transport, accommodation, catering and spaces for research participants. For many companies, organizations, researchers in the academic environment, using an online Focus Group is a less expensive method that would otherwise be impossible to implement from the financial point of view.

On the other hand, Hughes and Lang (2004) claim that researchers strongly oppose the introduction of the online Focus Group method in qualitative research, because they believe that in this form the dynamics of the group disappear, and the influence and quality of the moderator's discussion are limited. However, these authors think that the moderator does not lose his influence in the group, because his abilities to lead the group and direct the discussion are not significantly limited by technology. The moderator should not perceive the distance of research participants and impersonal contact during an online Focus Group as a barrier. Furthermore, the authors claim that online video interviews can be of the same quality as face-to-face meetings with research participants. The moderator must be an expert on the given topic, know his limits, know and be able to use modern technologies and use them for the benefit of the group. For them, online focus groups are more of a challenge than an obstacle in obtaining information for the implementation of research.

Chrastina (2019) points out that the use of this method provides immense help and efficiency in the field of obtaining the opinions of clients, professionals in social service facilities and organizations. The method helps to improve the services provided, brings new innovations and modifications that respond to the needs of clients. In this way, social services, social assistance and social work become better quality, more targeted and adequately responsive to changes in clients, their needs and changes taking place in society.

Implementation of focus group

On the issue of focus group preparation and their incorporation into research design, Morgan (2001) states that “one of the things we are trying to convey is the importance of thinking about focus groups in relation to research design. In fact, the success of the project as a whole depends on a combination of thoughtfully defined research objectives, systematic choice of questions to be asked, careful selection of participants, the manner in which these people will be selected and thorough analysis of the data, together with skillful group moderation” (Morgan, 2001, p .91).

The role of the moderator is important for the realization of the Focus Group itself, who leads the entire discussion and constantly focuses (focus) and returns to the main topic. If there is stagnation in the group, they have to engage the participants again, and all in a very sensitive and non-violent way. Each moderator has an assistant available during the discussion, who takes care of recording, providing technical things, refreshments, lighting, notes from the discussions. It also monitors whether any topic has been omitted and records the non-verbal expressions of the participants. The role of this assistant is important in the analysis of research findings.

Preparing and starting a Focus Group

The Focus Group method is described by Hair et al. (2000) in the following three stages.

- Planning a study using the Focus Group research method.
- Implementation of own group discussion.
- Analyzing the results and creating a research report.

Moderator's opening remarks. First of all, it is important to welcome and register the par-

ticipants and thank them for being willing to participate in the Focus Group. Respondents are invited to sit comfortably and are offered refreshments, coffee, tea, mineral water, etc. Then there is a mutual introduction of the moderator and the assistant who will implement the Focus Group. In our case, the moderator's assistant was an IT worker - network administrator, which also had its advantages if there were technical problems in the room. This is followed by a mutual introduction of the present participants and information about the method and the topic that will be discussed during the Focus Group. Respondents are given cards on which they write their first names and attach them to their clothes so that they can be addressed well. Respondents are also given pre-filled questionnaires in which they anonymously fill in their profession, age and length of experience in the field.

However, for the purpose of research, we must also consider possible problems. Because we get a real picture if we create the trust of the participants and preserve their anonymity. The results, and especially the initially unexpected results, can be very serious and it will depend on how they are interpreted and used in a qualified manner.

The research set of the Focus Group was 6 respondents, of which 4 women and 2 men aged between 29 and 51 years, who work as professional workers in helping professions in social service facilities and have 5 to 15 years of professional experience. There were 2 general nurses, including 1 practical nurse and 4 workers in direct care (caregivers).

Basic rules of the Focus Group

It is very important to acquaint the participants with the ethical rules of the Focus Group. The most basic ones include:

- Trust and anonymity.
- Collected data will remain securely stored.
- The information provided will remain confidential and the participants anonymous.
- The respondent has the right to terminate the research at any time without the stated reason.
- Respondents can be offered a summary of the results after the end of the project.
- Complicated relationships of trust with other group members may arise.

- Ask everyone to keep the discussion confidential (some topics are only suitable for one-on-one conversations)
- Make sure that there are no racist, sexist or otherwise offensive insinuations.
- Make sure that different cultural contexts are not legitimized within the group.

One person always speaks. It is not advisable to interrupt conversations and run other side conversations. All present participants take part in the discussion. No one has a dominant role. Everyone has the right to say their opinion. Everyone has the right to comment on the opinion of another, but they do not have the right to condemn or otherwise dishonor them. Everyone has the right to refuse to testify if the questions are unpleasant or unacceptable. The respondent must not be forced to answer. Everyone has the right to stop their answer if they don't want to continue. Everyone has the right to end their participation in the group if necessary. The information that participants learn about each other belongs only to them and to no other person. Participants address each other by name and do not use profanity. The recording and other data from the course of the group are used exclusively for research purposes and the protection of personal data is ensured.

Introductory discussion and motivational work

At the beginning of the discussion, the moderator, as we have already described in the previous subsection 1.3.1, introduces the participants, introduces himself, communicates the purpose of the research and the basic rules of the discussion. He points out that no answer is right or wrong - it's just different opinions. They must not forget to inform the discussants that their names will not be published anywhere and that the discussion is being recorded. It will also announce the expected duration of the discussion. This is usually 2.5 hours.

Focus Group discussion core

This is authentic communication. The role of the moderator is important, gradually drawing all participants into the discussion and emphasizing that everything is consistent and unbiased. The discussion is maintained as long as it brings relevant information. It is important to work with

time, the correct schedule and information for participants - how much time is left, etc.

End of discussion

In the final phase, no further discussion is initiated, nor is another topic developed. Partial currents that have started are allowed to run out. It is appropriate to give the participants time to comment on anything they missed during the discussion, but in such a way as not to open up another discussion. It is possible to perform a so-called short round, which allows feedback for the moderator. At the end of the Focus Group, the moderator thanks the participants and asks a final question. Did we forget something important? He will reward the participants financially, or hand over gifts.

Empirical realization of focus group

Our decision to conduct a Focus Group began with a general interest in obtaining information regarding the effects of burnout among professionals working in social service settings. Before starting the research, we needed to answer basic questions.

• Why should the study be carried out?

To obtain information for a qualitative study and the creation of a dissertation on the topic: **Impacts of the burnout syndrome of professional workers in selected social service facilities.**

• What type of information do we get with this method?

Information and experiences of professional workers in the helping professions with burnout syndrome.

• What kind of information is most important to us?

Personal contacts with respondents. Semi-structured interviews with open questions, standardized questionnaires, statements of respondents.

• How will this information be used?

For the creation of a dissertation in the form of a qualitative study. The outputs of the respondents on preventive measures at the individual and organizational level will be used for further study and social work students.

• Who is requesting this information?

External student of the Charles University in

Bratislava, Department of Social Work. The statements of the respondents will of course be anonymous and will be used for the creation of the dissertation.

We personally addressed the respondents during a workshop at the Gerontological Days held in June 2023 in Ústí nad Labem. These interviewed respondents worked in 3 residential services in a social service facility in the Karlovy Vary region. The respondents were professionals in helping professions. These were general nurses and direct care workers. We approached the Focus Group participants in person, in writing and by e-mail. Out of 12 respondents, only 6 respondents agreed to participate. The reason for disagreement among the other respondents was a time deficit and a sensitive topic that they refused to talk about. 6 respondents participated in the Focus Group, including 4 women and 2 men aged between 29 and 51 years old, who work as professional workers in helping professions in social service facilities and have 5 to 15 years of professional experience. There were 2 general nurses, including 1 practical nurse and 4 workers in direct care (caregivers).

An important part of the preparation was the selection of the location where the Focus Group will take place. The training rooms of the Karlovy Vary Regional Library in Karlovy Vary were a suitable choice for our research. We secured these spaces in advance with the director of the organization. First of all, we introduced the organization's management to the project. We have shared the date and time of the Focus Group and the size of the research set. It is important to emphasize that the following factors apply to the selection. In the room, a round table and chairs should be arranged so that the participants can see each other and have eye contact with each other. For recording reasons, the room should not be near busy streets and other sources of noise, which the training room in the Karlovy Vary regional library fulfilled. The room was in neutral territory. There was a one-way mirror in the room, which made it possible to watch the entire discussion. Snacks and drinks for Focus Group participants must not be forgotten. An audio and video recording was made of the discussions. Among other technical aids, we used a flipchart and markers, cards with the first

names of the participants. It was important to create a time and financial plan for discussions.

We were interested in interactions in which professionals in the helping professions are able to share their experiences with the issue of burnout. We asked the respondents 5 questions related to the problems of burnout syndrome.

Questions about burnout:

- What is the level of awareness of the burnout syndrome among professionals in ZSS?
- What are the causes and risk factors of burnout?
- What do professionals consider the most challenging in the performance of their profession?
- What are the possibilities of prevention against the possible effects of burnout syndrome used by professionals from ZSS?
- What solutions would they propose in the situation if they found out that there is a person suffering from burnout syndrome in their environment?

Respondents described risk factors, causes of burnout syndrome. They discussed the possibilities of preventive measures. Unfortunately, most of them encounter the most common risk factors at their workplaces, which have an adverse effect on work and personal life.

We have listed these factors and causes in the following tables.

A look at the causes of the burnout syndrome

There are common signs, according to which we can have a generalized view of the causes of burnout syndrome. Part of it may be related to the nature of the work, others to coping and solving problem situations. Other signs may relate to a person's personality traits. For workers in the helping professions, it is mainly a lack of social recognition from colleagues and management. A demanding workload. Critical clients. The profession is psychologically exhausting for permanent communication and engagement. Consequences of chronic stress. Very bad relationships and conflicts in the workplace. The main triggers of burnout syndrome are chronic stress, permanent time pressure and high emotional tension. It is a reaction of the body and above all of the mind to long-term mental exhaustion, intense preoccupation with a certain task and everyday stress.

Classification of risk factors	
External factors	
Employment and work organization	<p>Long-term and repeated dealings with people. Lack of personnel, time, funds and professional experience. Work overload and lack of rest. Work performance is not sufficiently appreciated. Too demanding working conditions. Long-term duration of unfavorable conditions. Too demanding work deadlines or work qualitative and quantitative requirements. Existence of demanding competitive conditions and high performance requirements in the workplace. Work routine. Reduced possibility of self-realization. Rejection from clients, others and superiors. Striving for advancement on the professional ladder. Bad organization of work.</p>
Family	<p>Excessive attention to the problems of others. Dismal housing and financial conditions. Illness or other long-term burden in the family. Partner relationship problems and conflicts.</p>
Company	<p>The competitive nature of our company. Gradation of setting goals beyond the limit exceeding the physical or emotional capabilities of individuals. A false image of success. The pace of society. Acceleration of social time. The effort not to be behind others in terms of performance and finances.</p>
Internal factors	
	<p>Too much enthusiasm for work. Internal tendency towards competitiveness and comparison with others. Poor internal self-esteem. Strong perception of failure. Subjective perception of the difficulties of one's own living conditions. Poor physical condition. Irregular daily biorhythm. Trying to do everything alone. Low level of assertiveness. The inability to say no. Not managing conflicts. Trying to control everything. Inability of active and passive rest and relaxation . Excessive responsibility. High demands on yourself.</p>

We have discussed about preventive measures and here we have given a brief description of preventive measures. It is necessary to reduce excessively high demands. Avoid the helper syndrome (exaggerated sensitivity to other people's needs and requests). The art of learning to say NO - healthy assertiveness. Moving between

compassion and emotional detachment. Focus on more important activities and setting priorities. Time your work. Develop a good plan for solving tasks and divide larger tasks into sum stages. Set aside time for breaks when completing tasks. Seek emotional support and express your feelings openly, tactfully and sensitively.

Causes of burnout syndrome		
Personal	Working	Private
Behavior type A	Lack of recognition	Partnership deficit
Perfectionism	Workaholism	Conflicts in relationships
Emotional deficit	Work load	High demands from the partner
Cumulative stress, psychological burden	Inability to work independently	Competitiveness in privacy
Negative evaluation of one's own person	Lack of support and appreciation from colleagues and superiors	Exclusion from friendly relationships
Above average empathic skills	Deficit of experiences and achievements	Interest activities are pushed aside
Excessive euphoria and enthusiasm when starting work	Insufficient financial evaluation	Loss of interest in body care
High ambitions	Inadequate organization of work	Failure to follow eating habits
Conflicts of values	Unfair conditions	High scores on difficult life events
Suppression of emotions	Stereotyping and performing meaningless tasks	Dissatisfaction in the conditions of existence
Inability to relax	Onerous work with problem clients	
Low assertiveness	Absence of quality supervision and further education	
Excessive need to please others	Lack of professional perspective	
Deficit of rational time planning	Failure to use qualification	
Low self-reflection	Changes on the side of the organization are not feasible	

Look for support in solving tasks, ask for advice from colleagues, or look for suggestions for solutions. Avoid negative thoughts - categorically stop these thoughts. Prevent communication problems in the form of open communication. Avoid hasty decisions and promises that cannot be fulfilled. Maintain balance in critical situations. Choose an appropriate method of conflict resolution. Balance the workload with the necessary amount of rest and replenishment of energy. Choose an appropriate selection of ac-

tivities and a circle of relationships with positive charge and energy. Learn relaxation techniques. Be more interested in your health and monitor the body's warning signals. Choose from suitable training options. Take advantage of the supervision offer.

Focus Group Analysis

Focus Group research provides a large amount of data. During the analysis, it is necessary to emphasize the key questions and fo-

cus on the research project. Unlike quantitative research, the analysis of data from a Focus Group can begin almost immediately after the discussions, but at the same time it takes much longer. During the analysis, we must observe in particular those moments in which it is possible to find a change in the respondent's opinions and the cause that caused the change. When did the change in opinion occur, when did the respondent become aware of it and why did this change happen. The moderator should follow the mentioned facts already during the discussion. In the analysis, the notes of the non-verbal behavior of the participants, the so-called observation notes, are important. And it is also a good idea to draw a diagram of how the respondents were distributed in the room. In conclusion the Focus Group moderator will end and thank the respondents for their participation and provide all participants with financial rewards and gifts.

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