



COMMENTARY

The Focus Group in Nursing Research: A Suitable Method or the Latest Trend? An Argumentative Paper

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A focus group (FG) is a particular type of group interview in which the discussion is centered on a well-defined topic and facilitated by a moderator. Focus groups have been widely used as a data-collection method in qualitative research to generate notions for inquiry or action in original fields, to generate hypotheses considering the participants' perception, to evaluate various study populations or research situations, to develop interviews' guide and questionnaires, and to generate evidence for a study on a varied scale. This approach to data collection has been increasingly utilized in the last two decades (Plummer, 2017).

We think that the documented advantages of FG usage as a data source stand behind its popularity in nursing research. It enables access to a large number of people and promotes idea exchange and discussion between them. Furthermore, it has a low cost compared to other methods; it gives the researcher a chance to use a larger sample size in qualitative inquiries. Also, it helps the researcher gain more in-depth and rich information through the participants' interactions and the obtained data had high face validity (Andarmoyo, 2022). We think that these advantages facilitate its usage without an appropriate rationale for it and regardless of the identified disadvantages, such as the risk of domination of some participants in the group discussion, loss of control over the discussion's focus by the facilitator and the need for a highly qualified researcher with high facilitation skills. Moreover, the data analysis

is complex and difficult as it needs to be carried out within the interview context. Besides, some ethical issues could arise and need to be resolved; such as the consent process, the anonymity and confidentiality and the risk of harm that results from disclosing sensitive information within the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). All of the mentioned disadvantages and ethical challenges can affect the quality of the collected data negatively and can generate false conclusions (Queirós et al., 2017).

The incremental FG usage as a research method raises concerns about the degree to which this method is being used, as it is the most suitable one *versus* the most widespread ones. The justification for the routine FG usage is debatable, as the available rationale is insufficient and more details are needed (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Indeed, we found that many researchers explain the FG usage as a data-collection tool with little or without description and rationalization for using this method. Most researchers explained the FG usage as they wanted to benefit from the member interaction to generate deeper information, neglecting the fact that some individuals' perspectives could be missed or influenced by the group dynamics.

Regardless of the reason behind choosing this data-collection method, the researcher should consider the purpose of the study carefully and the characteristics of the selected participants should be in line with the study's purpose, avoiding any potential bias (Doody et al., 2013). For example, the appropriate sample size is

controversial in the literature; it is suggested to be between four and twelve participants depending on the studied phenomenon and the sensitivity of the studied topic (Doody et al., 2013). This was clear in a study conducted by Leonardsen et al. (2021) to investigate the perspective of supervisors regarding supervising. In this study, the authors used 8 FGs to obtain rich information, but no clear explanations were provided regarding the appropriateness of this approach for the purpose of the study. Moreover, the unequal power between the participants in the work environment was not considered (Leonardsen et al., 2021).

The absence of such a rationale makes it questionable whether the nursing researchers are utilizing this approach built on a comprehensive understanding of the research methodology *versus* the familiarity and popularity of this approach. In addition, it is important for the research credibility that the author can validate a foundation for the use of a specific approach. The recent growth in FG usage, often without a detailed rationale, might propose the FG perception as a 'one size fits all' methodological approach, which could lead to potential unsuitable method utilization.

In our opinion, the use of focus-group interviews should be justified and explained. The quality of the research findings is highly connected with the appropriateness of the data-collection method. So, we recommend the use of a focus group when the interaction of the participants and group dynamics is intended to be studied as a way to understand a phenomenon. Moreover, it is important to consider all the practical issues carefully, such as the group size, sampling and accessibility and cost-effectiveness when using the FG approach. Moreover, the group interaction, the moderator's role, the flow of the group and the maximization of the participants' involvement should be considered. Also, the validity of the collected data

should be ensured by giving clear opening instructions, enhancing trust and ethnicity and minimizing the influence of group members or group pressure.

In nursing research, the decision to select this approach to data collection should be built on solid ground with identifiable rationale. That is, the data that could be generated from the FG approach is broader and deeper than that generated by individualized interviews and uses the group dynamics to empower the participants to make them feel heard and more comfortable to share their experiences and thoughts. Additionally, the FG approach could be used when the collected data can not be obtained by other methods of data collection. On the other hand, the FG approach will not be useful when numerical data is required and should be avoided when the studied topic is a sensitive issue or when the participants are not willing to share their thoughts and feelings in front of each other (Gill et al., 2008).

In conclusion, the FG data-collection method is a tremendously beneficial exploration method of people's experiences, thoughts, and attitudes on a studied phenomenon. The communication and interaction between participants in FG approach are an influential incentive for discussion and can motivate people to intricate or explain a certain idea. On the other hand, the focus-group method should be used with a rationale that helps the study's purpose rather than using it as a trend in nursing research.

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Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interests is to be declared by the authors.

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