

## PUBLICATIONS THAT USED FOCAL GROUP AS RESEARCH TECHNIQUE: WHAT DO THEY TEACH US?

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### ABSTRACT

This research aimed to know the scientific production published in the databases of the Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS) and Scientific Electronic Library Online Brazil (SciELO), which used Focus Groups (FG) as a technique for data collection. This is an exploratory study, integrative review type using the keywords: "Focus Groups" and "research". The sample consisted of nine studies selected from the established inclusion criteria. Of these, five were from Lilacs database and four from SciELO Brazil. The material was analyzed by the method of scientific reading and organized into four main axes for thematic discussion: characterization of the published studies; advantages in the use of focus groups in qualitative research; systematization and operation of FG technique. We conclude that the explicitness of the FG stages of systematization provides transparency and quality as well as originality and validation of data collected.

**Keywords:** Focus Groups. Research.

### INTRODUCTION

Currently, the design of qualitative research is increasingly gaining relevance. The exponential growth of qualitative research in the last twelve years in Brazil and in the world brings satisfaction to researchers in the field, when they find quantitative and rigor increase of empirical researches<sup>(1)</sup>.

Thus, considering the challenges surrounding the design of qualitative research, as well as the search for a practice that allows the transparency of the process, it becomes pertinent the performance of studies that can promote discussions on methodological aspects that guide preparation and development of research.

With this understanding, this paper addresses

one of the elements of qualitative research, which is the systematization of one of the data collection techniques, with increasing use of nursing researchers: the Focus Group (FG).

The FG is defined as a research technique that provides the researcher to bring together in one place and for a certain period of time, an amount of people who are part of a research target audience, with the aim of collecting data, from the dialogue and discussion with and among participants, information about a specific topic<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

At the moment, the FG technique has been widely used in the fields of social and health sciences, and although nursing has a great tradition with group activities, the use of FG in a organized and systematic way, is still relatively new in the area<sup>(3,4,6)</sup>.

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In a qualitative nursing research, the use of FG is an option that allows at the same time, data collection to the researcher for his/her studies and guarantees to participants a space for reflection of their own conceptions<sup>(6)</sup>.

It is noted, however, the need for greater knowledge and disclosure by nursing on the use of its technique, ensuring that the inaccuracies in its use does not impair the quality of the results<sup>(4)</sup>.

In this context, the motivation to conduct a study on the systematization of the steps that composes the FG technique emerged during discussions held by a curriculum component "Qualitative Methods in Nursing" from the Graduate Program at the School of Nursing, Federal University of Bahia, in which we have been inserted since the year 2009. Another stimulus was the statement during the literature review on the topic, from the scarce publications in journals indexed in national database in a systematic way to discuss the criteria to be followed in the steps that composes the FG.

In this direction, the following question was raised: what is the scientific production indexed in the databases: Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (Lilacs) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online Brazil (SciELO), which uses and discusses the steps that comprise the FG as a technique for data collection?

To obtain an answer to this question we defined the following objective: to understand the scientific production indexed in the Lilacs and SciELO databases, which uses and discusses the steps that composes the FG as a technique for data collection, enabling the characterization of these researches, as well as discussion on the technique systematization.

## METHODOLOGY

This is an integrative review, method that allows the organization, summarization and synthesis of results presented in the selected studies for materials, favoring interpretation and analysis of knowledge for its applicability in practice<sup>(6)</sup>.

A literature search was performed in Lilacs and SciELO databases, using the following keywords and its combinations: "focus groups"

and "research" during the months of November and December 2010.

The inclusion criteria used were: original studies published in Portuguese in the period of 2000-2010, available online, in full, with data presented in the abstracts, demonstrating suitability to the proposed topic - focusing on the use of the FG technique in their titles. Studies duplicated in the two databases were excluded.

One hundred and thirty studies were found in the Lilacs database and twenty-four studies in the SciELO database. After applying the inclusion criteria, our study was composed of nine studies.

Subsequently, the selected studies were submitted to the scientific method of reading, which consists of the following steps: syncretic vision that provides a preliminary approach to the theme and a selective reading, locating information in accordance with the study objectives; analytical view, corresponding to a critical-reflexive reading of the selected texts; this is accompanied by a reflection in the search of meanings and choosing main ideas, and in synthetic vision which is the last step of that method that is consolidated through interpretative reading<sup>(7)</sup>.

After that, a box was prepared to characterize the articles in question, containing the following information: period published; authors' academic background; title; objective; used method, and results found in studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the nine selected studies, five were from Lilacs and four were indexed by SciELO Brazil. After attending to the steps of the scientific method of reading, described above, this research was organized into four discussion axes, namely: 1) characterization of selected studies (Box 1); 2) advantages of using focus groups in qualitative research; 3) systematization of FG technique, and 4) Operationalization of the FG technique.

The discussions begins with the presentation of the box containing the characterization of the studies analyzed in this research.

Journal (volume, n°, page, year)	Authors' academic background	Title	Objectives of the study	Methods used	Results regarding FG
<i>Rev Esc Enferm USP</i> ; 35(2): 115-121, jun. 2001	Nurses	The use of focus group (FG) as qualitative methods in health promotion	To demonstrate the importance for health promotion in the use of FG for the diagnosis and evaluation of health programs.	Qualitative approach applying the FG technique.	It features contextualized essences of steps that compose FG techniques throughout the body of the research and clearly described the criteria used to operationalize each step in the technique of conducting field research.
<i>Rev Sul-Bras Odontol</i> ; 7(2)jun. 2010.	Dentist	Focus groups: a strategy for health research	To apply the strategy of FG as part of the evaluation of a course discipline of <i>strictu-sensu</i> graduate studies.	Qualitative approach, with the application of the FG technique.	A general contextualization of the interview modality was done in FG, in one of the items composing the article, followed by the description of the criteria used for the technique systematization, in the methodology.
<i>Acta sci., Health sci</i> ;31(2):165-170, jul.-dec. 2009	Dentist	Focus group technique as a method for assessing adolescents' knowledge regarding oral health	To analyze, using the focus groups technique, the understanding of adolescents in relation to their oral health		A general contextualization of the interview modality was done in FG, in the introduction of the research. The criteria used for technique use are not explained in the methodology. The data obtained with the FG are discussed directly in the section that addresses the results of field research.
<i>Rev. enferm. UERJ</i> ; 18(1): 92-96, jan.-mar. 2010	Nurses	Focus groups with community health agents: subsidies for understanding these social actors	To describe the work process of the community health agent	Qualitative approach using the FG technique funded by the methodology of problematization	The systematization of FG technique is not contextualized throughout the study. Data obtained from application of FG are discussed directly in the field search results.
<i>Arq. bras. psicol</i> ; 53(2): 38-53, 2001	Psychologist	Focus Group: Qualitative research method with adolescents at risk.	To know the view of adolescents who suffered maltreatment intrafamily about his/her family.	Qualitative approach with the FG technique.	The contextualization of the systematization of the steps that composes the FG are discussed throughout the study text. In the description of the technique operationalization, the criteria are explained clearly at all stages of the described experiment.
<i>RER, Rio de Janeiro</i> , vol. 42, n° 03, p. 451-468, jul/sept 2004	Agronomist	Combination of focus groups and discriminant analysis: a method for classification of agricultural production systems	To present and discuss a method of standardizing production systems	Qualitative and quantitative approach performed with the FG technique, followed by discriminant analysis technique	It briefly discusses, in one of the sections of the study the general assumptions that guide the FG technique, criteria used for the technique are not explained in the methodology. The data collected with the FG are discussed directly in the item that addresses the field research results.
<i>Journal of Information Systems and Technology Management</i> Vol. 6, No. 1, 2009, p. 05-24	Administrator, Journalist and Psychologist	Online focus groups: from conceptual reflections to application of virtual environment	To describe and discuss the aspects that involve the use of focus groups in a virtual environment	Quantitative approach in the first step (online questionnaire to select participants for FGs), and qualitative in the second step (focus groups online).	Discusses the theoretical foundations of face-to-face focus groups in a systematic way, explaining clearly the criteria used in its transposition into the virtual environment.

<i>Rev. Estudos de Psicologia</i> , PUC-Campinas, v. 21, n. 2, p. 63-77, May/August 2004	Psychologist	Focus groups in qualitative research of organizational identity: application example	To present a practical example application, which shows how focus groups can be used in the investigation of organizational identity	Qualitative approach that applies the focal groups technique.	It contextualize the essential characteristics of the steps that composes the FG technique throughout the body of the research and clearly describes the criteria used to operationalize the technique in each step of field research.
<i>Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa</i> May-Aug 2006, Vol. 22 n. 2, pp. 175-182	Journalist and Administrator	“Working out Genre”: the focal group and the speech acts in the interaction of adolescents with Soap Operas	Investigate gender issues present in the speech acts of adolescents in a situation of interaction focused on a scene from a Brazilian Soap Operas	Quantitative and qualitative approach with the use of focus groups in different age groups.	The systematization of FG technique is mentioned only briefly in the Methodology. The data collected with the technique are discussed in the item addressing directly the results and discussion of the field research.

**Box 1.** Characterization of the included studies.

By analyzing the journals where the included studies were published, we identified journals of nursing, dentistry, economics, business administration and psychology. However, six of these were originated in the health sciences with the publications of nursing, dentistry and psychology. We know the high affinity of these knowledge areas for qualitative research, what explains the data collection by FG.

Among the six studies written by health professionals, two had nurses as authors<sup>(8,9)</sup>. The first article analyzes the assumptions that guide the technique, and discusses in depth the systematization of FG techniques in methodology and in the description of the operationalization in the field research<sup>(8)</sup>. The second does not bring a detailed description of the technique, it only conceptualizes and then describes how the groups were formed and the amount of times that each group met<sup>(9)</sup>.

Regarding references to FG in the text of the studies, it could be found that, in general, they bring an initial conceptualization of the technique, followed by description of its operationalization.

Of the nine studies included, four contextualize the concept and essential characteristics of the FG technique<sup>(8,10-12)</sup>. Clearly describe the criteria used for the preparation and operationalization of the technique, both in methodology and in every stage of their application in the field.

The other articles<sup>(13-16)</sup> do not present such a rigorous description. Some bring only general contextualization of the interview modality in FG, in one of the items that compose it. Others,

bring only the methodology, a detailed description of the criteria adopted for the systematization of the technique in field research, not doing more considerations on the FG throughout the text.

In one of the studies, the systematization of the technique is not contextualized in any of the items; the data collected with the application of FG are discussed directly on the item that brings the results of the field research<sup>(9)</sup>.

Although it is known that the description of the operationalization of FG gives the study a greater transparency and credibility, we also know that the limitation of the number of pages in the journals for publication of a study makes the author gives priority to the presentation and discussion of results. What appears to be the most coherent. However, it is important that the author exercise their power of synthesis and present to the reader, even if in a condensed form, the steps followed in the preparation and operationalization of the technique. This information will be very useful to future researchers, avoiding that methodological inaccuracies undermine the quality of the results of their studies.

In this context, in order to contribute to the use of the FG technique, in researches with qualitative approach, we present the following thematic axes that address the content obtained from literature review.

### Advantages in the use of focus groups in qualitative research

The choice of FG technique for data collection should happen after the object

definition, objectives and methodological design to be used in research. Thus, the methodological decisions depend on the objectives outlined, as it will influence in the composition of the groups, in the number of elements and in homogeneity or heterogeneity of the participants. The use of the FG must be also associated with the premises and assumptions of the researcher<sup>(3,8,17,18)</sup>.

This technique provides a more authentic social interaction, and it may be compared to an example of social unit in minimal operation and, so, the senses or representations that emerge are more influenced by the social nature of group interaction. In this sense, "the purpose of the focus group is to encourage participants to speak and react to what others in the group say"<sup>(17:75)</sup>.

It is noteworthy, however, that there is the danger of misusing the FG, because this is not always the most suitable technique to certain research objectives. Inappropriate use of the technique results in a poorly designed, besides that, when overly enthusiastic it threatens to discredit the research method itself<sup>(5,17)</sup>.

With this understanding, it appears that there are situations in which the FG should not be used, such as, when the objective is to obtain individual narratives. In these cases, the question does not concern the reluctance of people and their experiences in a group setting, but the fact of having several participants competing to tell their individual stories. It is also not advisable to use the FG when researches want to assess attitudes, considering these in the context of social research, are performed instead of being pre-formulated<sup>(5)</sup>.

It can be seen that the advantages of using FG are diverse. Among them, there is the possibility of extending access to information about a phenomenon, allowing participants to give account of the beliefs and attitudes that are present in their behaviors and the others, through the exchange of experiences and opinions among participants. Thus, the information brought by the participant can be identified as group data<sup>(11)</sup>.

With this understanding, it appears that the use of the FG technique provides the researcher to capture manifestations of participants' subjectivity in their social context, through the processes of individual and group interaction, by creating opportunities by simultaneously same administration of their identities and make a

collective representation to the interviewer. It appears, still, that when used to its full potential, the FG is able to transcend the more limited objectives by providing substantial explanations for the interviewer. Therefore, its planning should be receive adequate attention<sup>(10,18,19)</sup>.

### **Systematization of the Focus Group technique**

The planning and setting of a focus group is perhaps the most laborious step of the technique. The possibilities to be considered will depend on two basic factors: time and financial resources. The main demands are: recruitment of participants; the choice of the moderator and his/her assistants; organizing technical resources for recording sessions; selection of a suitable site for operationalization of the groups; and the possibility of hiring professionals to transcribe the data collected<sup>(3,8,17,20)</sup>.

Besides these, another demand to be considered as an object of reflection is related to randomness, which should not be used in the composition of the groups. It is recommended that prior assessment of the profile of the participants is performed, according to the object the researcher wants to investigate. The simple arrangement of people in a group cannot ensure the achievement of objectives, one should take into account the potential of each participant contribute to the discussion of the topic<sup>(17)</sup>.

Still on the composition of the group, this must be homogeneous in terms of characteristics that interfere radically in the perception of the subject in focus, aiming to ensure comfortable environment for exchanging of experiences and impressions of a personal nature<sup>(3,8,17)</sup>.

Regarding the size of the FG, the number generally recommended lies in a range from six to fifteen participants. However, nowadays, there is a tendency to form smaller groups consisting of five to seven people, which are called mini groups. It is noteworthy that in research whose goal is to generate lots of ideas, it is more enriching to opt for a larger group, whereas the intention is to maximize the depth of expression of each participant, a small group works best<sup>(3)</sup>.

In practice of social research, generally the interest is aimed at exploring the deep meanings for the participants and their ways in which the perspectives are socially constructed. In those, a

maximum number of eight is recommended, and a minimum of three to four participants<sup>(5,8,17)</sup>.

With regard to the number of meetings required, it is recommended at least two for each variable considered relevant to the topic discussed. For example, men and women, users and non-users, professional and family category in order to ensure greater freedom of expression<sup>(11)</sup>.

Also in this context, the total number of groups should be linked to the objectives of the research and, in the case of qualitative approach, although initially determine the quantity, the indicator should be the saturation of alternative answers<sup>(5,8)</sup>.

Recruitment can also happen in the following ways: by phone; through the use of a short questionnaire to select the appropriate participants; by newspaper advertisement; through attendance at schools or health organizations; by successive nominating of people belonging to the social cycle of the target population; and through key informants in the community studied<sup>(3)</sup>.

With respect to planning the discussion script, two conditions are essential: first, it must be sufficiently provocative to allow an enthusiastic debate, and second, it should promote conditions of deepening. Thus, one can opt for the use of some strategies: formulation of a central question, accompanied by items that during the application of the technique can help in conducting the topic; choosing audio visual material for later discussion at first and development and implementation by researcher as an episodic text that is able to cause and maintain the focus of discussion<sup>(1,8,10,18)</sup>.

The researcher needs to be aware of the participation of the entire team involved in the investigation, not forgetting that the script should be guided by research objectives previously defined. One must also count with a reference time duration of the FG, which is typically one to two hours<sup>(3,4,8,12)</sup>.

The setting for the development of FG is another important aspect to be considered by the researcher. The environment must ensure privacy, be comfortable, facilitator of the debate, neutral, easy to access for participants, silent and able to promote good eye contact between all participants. For this, we recommend the usage

of a room with comfortable chairs arranged in a circle<sup>(3,18)</sup>.

Among all these aspects discussed, the operationalization of the FG is evaluated as the most challenging objective to be achieved. This relies on the performance of the functions exercised by the team responsible for the FG operationalization.

### **Operationalization of Focus Group technique**

The operationalization of the FG is conditional upon the composition of a team. The ideal is that it is composed of a mediator (or moderator), a reporter, an observer, a recording operator, a transcriber and a typist. It is noteworthy, however, that this ideal type of composition is not part of the reality of the majority of Brazilian researchers, particularly within the graduate studies where scarcity of resources is a constant.

In this context, it is recommended for overcoming internal difficulties, the adoption of a modification in which the team can be composed by two researchers in the conditions of moderator (facilitator) and observer, acting with strict discipline and time availability<sup>(3,9)</sup> they can obtain considerable successes in the use of the technique.

Therefore, we defined the duties of the team, the profile of participants, the interview script and the setting of performance, so the time of the FG is reached. The conduction of the start of work is up to the moderator and this should be presented to the group and the other team members. At this time, he/she shall state the research objectives in a honest, fast and generally way, followed by explanations related to the way that the group will work. He/she should also make clear the general rules, emphasizing that the time is not focused on the search for consensus in the discussion that will be undertaken and that diverging perspectives and experiences should also be explicit<sup>(3,4,8,12)</sup>.

In the early stages, some rules can be adopted, in order to help optimize the technique, such as: only one person should speak at a time; avoid parallel discussions so that everyone can participate; no one can dominate the discussion; and everyone has the right to say what they think<sup>(8,11,12,18)</sup>.

Another important item to be highlighted concerns the legal ethical aspects. During the planning of the FG, we must be alert to the proposed theme. This can cause a stressful situation due to the discussion of complex topics and experienced negatively by participants. Thus, before the start of the activity, there must be a concern with the reading of "consent form", which should be written with an accessible language for the understanding of the participants, then followed by the signing of the term by participants or their guardians<sup>(4,5)</sup>.

The operationalization of FG, may be used strategies to promote an environment of relaxation for the event of such discussions, for example: promote the presentation of the participants with each other; use of identification cards, also to avoid impersonal pronouncements and promote greater rapprochement between the group members, with a view to optimizing the group atmosphere<sup>(3,8,12,17)</sup>.

In the course, the discussion should be kept in focus the guided questions, and in case of deviation, the moderator should return to the topic by conducting a brief summary of what was discussed. Another aspect to be noted is the ability to continuously link the comments made by the group participants, in order to provide the raise of meanings and strengthen the group bond<sup>(3,4)</sup>.

One of the most difficult tasks of the moderator is to listen carefully to the group members that talk at the same time, which stimulates the participation of the most quiet, being careful not to send their personal opinions or judge the answers.

At the end of the operationalization of the FG it is also recommended to conduct final clarification to participants upon completion of the interview session, that is a moderator activity. It is important to allow enough time for participants to express any concern related to what was commented by them during the discussion<sup>(5)</sup>.

Given these brief approaches presented, one can see the relevance of the performance of the mediator in managing the FG. In this context, the moderator should be ahead in the directivity of the group, in order to ensure compliance with the ethical aspects and topic focusing, without inhibiting the emergence of divergent opinions<sup>(8,12,17)</sup>.

In this perspective, one of the major challenges in the task of the mediator in a FG is not only be able to "investigate what participants think, but uncovering why participants think as such"<sup>(5:64)</sup>. It is contended, also, that this high level of understanding does not appear magically during the FG applicability. Thus, it is necessary the active engagement of the researcher, acting as moderator in the technique use.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study allowed the expansion of knowledge about the importance of appropriation of the criteria that underlie the steps that comprise the investigation of FG technique. Thus, it was found that the description of the steps followed in the preparation and operationalization of the technique, when applied in the field, allows for greater transparency and credibility to the research, considering that this information will be very useful for future researchers, avoiding that methodological inaccuracies undermine the quality of study results.

It is worth noting that, given the opportunity, we could see that the explanation of the criteria adopted in the use of the FG technique provides evidence of originality, quality and consequent validation of the data collected by the researchers in their investigations.

It was also possible to verify that the use of the technique allows the researchers to the critical and dialectical exercise as it can promote the raising of an open debate on specific topics and sometimes provide the deconstruction and construction of concepts.

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## PUBLICAÇÕES QUE UTILIZARAM O GRUPO FOCAL COMO TÉCNICA DE PESQUISA: O QUE ELAS NOS ENSINAM?

### RESUMO

Este artigo teve o objetivo conhecer a produção científica divulgada nas bases de dados da Literatura Latino-americana do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (Lilacs) e Scientific Eletronic Library Online Brasil (SciELO), que utilizaram o Grupo Focal (GF) como técnica para coleta de dados. Trata-se de um estudo exploratório, tipo

revisão integrativa, utilizando os descritores: “grupos focais” e “pesquisa”. A amostra foi composta por nove artigos, selecionados a partir dos critérios de inclusão estabelecidos. Destes, cinco foram da base de dados Lilacs e quatro veiculados pela SciELO Brasil. O material foi analisado através do método de leitura científica e organizado em quatro eixos de discussão: caracterização dos estudos publicados; vantagens no uso do grupo focal na pesquisa qualitativa; sistematização da técnica GF e operacionalização da técnica do GF. Conclui-se que a explicitação da sistematização das etapas do GF proporciona transparência e qualidade, bem como originalidade e validação dos dados obtidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Grupo Focal. Pesquisa.

## PUBLICACIONES QUE UTILIZARON EL GRUPO FOCAL COMO TÉCNICA DE PESQUISA: LO QUE NOS ENSEÑAN?

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tenido como objetivo conocer la producción científica divulgada en la base de datos de Literatura Científica y Técnica en Salud de América Latina y del Caribe (Lilacs) y Scientific Eletronic Library Online Brasil (SciELO) que utilizaron Grupos Focales (GF) como técnica para coleta de datos. Se trata de un estudio exploratorio, tipo revisión integrativa, utilizando los descriptores: “grupos focales” y “pesquisa”. La amuestra fue composta por nueve artículos, seleccionados a partir de los criterios de inclusión establecidos. De estos, cinco fueron de la base de datos Lilacs y cuatro vehiculados por SciELO Brasil. El material fue analizado a través del método de lectura científica y organizado en cuatro ejes de discusión: caracterización de los estudios publicados; ventajas del uso del grupo focal en la pesquisa cualitativa, sistematización de la técnica del GF. Se concluye que la explicitación de la sistematización de las etapas del GF proporciona transparencia y calidad, así como, originalidad y validación de los datos obtenidos.

**Palabras clave:** Grupos Focales. Pesquisa.

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