

Making optimal use of the Focus Group method in Tanzania.

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Abstract

This article examines some methodological issues that arise when conducting focus group discussions in the majority world (developing countries), and describes one way of addressing them. While the method is widely used in the majority world, the methodological literature on how to moderate focus groups builds on accumulated experiences of how conversations work in the minority world (developed countries). This article suggests a way to apply the method more rigorously in a majority-world context. It draws on a trial-and-error innovation process spanning 40 discussions in Tanzania. Ensuring quality in data generation required thorough attention to issues of alterity, positionality and power. These issues are common challenges to methodological rigour when researching across difference in the majority world. But this article contends that if used correctly and to its strengths, the focus group method can indeed address and solve these challenges. This also entails creating appropriate conditions for interaction among focus groups participants.

KEYWORDS: Africa, developing countries, fieldwork, focus groups, method/ology, validity, positionality, power, alterity, cross-cultural research.

Introduction

Focus group discussions (FGDs) have become a widely used data generation method in the majority world, also known as 'third world', 'developing world' or 'global South'. In the wake of their initial surge, an Anglo-American literature of 'sceptical enthusiasm' emerged, clarifying what the method was good for and how to use it to its strengths (Bloor et al., 2001, Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001, Wilkinson, 2006, Parker and Titter, 2006). However this critical awareness had less influence on FGD practice in the majority world. Most of the published knowledge on how to conduct FGDs to achieve these strengths is specific to minority world contexts (Amoakohene, 2005, Hennink, 2007, Bloor et al., 2001, Greenbaum, 2000).

How can FGDs be made to work to their strengths in a majority-world context? This paper relates my attempts to address this question in Tanzania, in the face of challenges to rigour endemic to researching across difference in the majority world. I was only able to tackle these once I achieved the interaction which gives FGDs their unique advantages. Achieving this interaction required the type of 'imaginative experimentation with facilitator styles and group exercises' that the 'sceptical enthusiasts' call for (Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001, p.201, Barbour, 2009). My experience also shows that whereas *carrying out* FGDs, the goal of existing FGD methods texts in the region, was easy, *generating high-quality data* through FGDs requires the researcher to move through more difficult, and largely unmapped, terrain.

The distinction between majority- and minority-world contexts demands some caveats. Firstly, it is not meant as a reified division of the world into two categories, but rather as an imagined continuum. Many of the concerns raised in this article will also be relevant, to a lesser degree, to minority-world contexts. Secondly, the distinction is not synonymous with 'cultural differences', despite the common association of 'non-Western' with 'culture' (Narayan, 1997). The paper focuses on majority-world contexts in general, not culture specifically, and illustrates that 'cultural sensitivity' alone does not overcome steep power gradients and different discursive dispositions, neither of which are absent from minority-world research. Nevertheless the minority-majority distinction is a useful heuristic device, in allowing us to see the following. Firstly, that what passes as 'general' knowledge about focus group discussions, actually draws almost exclusively on knowledge from Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, thus raising the question 'what does this actually tell us about FGDs in countries like Tanzania?' Secondly, this terminology, rather than North-South, developed-developing, overturns the norm-other assumptions of this status quo by asking to what extent this is 'general knowledge' at all, given that the contexts on which it is built, are actually in a global minority? It thus shows knowledge about how focus groups work in Tanzania as something more than a charitable

special interest: although not generalisable to one homogenous 'majority world', it is one step towards a more truly general knowledge about how focus groups work, that is not limited to a minority of the world.

This paper begins with an overview of the FGD method, including discussions of the types of data it can reliably generate and the interaction by which it does so, and its potential to address challenges to rigour related to positionality, power and alterity. It then describes how these challenges are pinpointed in the methods literature on majority-world research as in special need of being addressed there. It identifies a gap on how to work the method to address such challenges outside the minority world in the little methods literature that exists on majority-world FGDs. It explains how the study was carried out in accordance with the existing literature, and depicts the type of data this generated. The paper then describes how positionality in particular was central to the 'failure' of the first FGDs, and how even successful manoeuvring between multiple identities did not address this threat to data quality. Finally, it describes the modifications that finally *did* make the method work to its strengths, and contrasts the data generated by the modified discussions with those from the initial discussions.

Focus group discussions: Uses, misuses and opportunities

FGDs are discussions among five to ten people on a given topic. A moderator keeps the discussion as focused, non-threatening and 'natural-feeling' as possible with minimal self-involvement. In summary, the method is useful for *group-level data on perceptions and norms as performed through inter-respondent interaction*. Methodologists concerned with sub-optimal uses of FGDs ascribe these to an inadequate understanding of the distinguishing features of the method and the data it generates (Kitzinger, 1999: 139, Barbour, 2009: 22, Puchta and Potter, 2004, Stewart et al., 2007: 13-16, Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001: 191, Wilkinson, 2006: 53, Wilkinson, 1998: 76).

One common mistake is to use FGDs as group interviews, which simply replicate interactions between researcher and interviewee on a group scale (Wilkinson, 2006, Parker and Tritter, 2006, Morgan, 1997, Kitzinger, 1999). In FGDs, the goal is that participants¹ converse among themselves, questioning, challenging and answering one another. What is said reflects participants' judgments of what is appropriate to say in the group, generating data of dubious *individual* value, and uniquely useful for exploring predominant social norms and values (Krueger and Casey, 2009, Lloyd-Evans, 2006, Smithson, 2000). Critics of 'faddish' uses of the method see group norms as the *only* topic for which it is not inferior to others (Bloor et al., 2001: 89). FGDs show attitudes as socially *performed* instead of individually *performed* (Puchta and Potter, 2004).

However all these advantages hinge on inter-respondent interaction, which is not always ensured, acknowledged, or even understood (Smithson, 2000, Wilkinson, 2006, Kitzinger, 1999). Group interaction is also what has caused researchers concerned with researcher-researched power relations to appreciate the method as a way of changing these. As interaction is shifted from researcher-participant to participant-participant, so is control and reference. This addresses some of the concerns raised by feminist social scientists regarding the exploitative potential of interviews (Wilkinson, 2006). As participants discuss and interpret the questions, re-phrase them and ask their own, not only are they less the subject of the researcher's 'imposition of meaning', but views and opinions emerge in greater complexity than they do from surveys and one-on-one interviews (Kotchetkova et al., 2008). Another concern in researching across boundaries of difference is that of 'otherness' and the danger that what participants say will be largely a function of the impression they want to give to an outsider. To a certain extent, the opinions expressed in FGDs, as in any research encounter, will be coloured by participants' self-presentation to an outsider. However, as respondents speak to one another, rather than to the external researcher, inter-participant dynamics supersede self-presentation vis-à-vis the researcher, moving the discussion to 'somewhere between an explanation to the Other – the researcher – and a group debating a topic of relevance to their lives' (Smithson, 2000, p.111). Participants' numerical advantage and the researcher's self-effacing facilitator role make it more likely that any 'othering' is done by the respondents rather than by the researcher (Wilkinson, 2006, Poso et al., 2008, Smithson, 2000).

It is this potential of FGDs to decentre the role of the researcher and increase participants' ownership of the research process that makes it 'rife with multiple affordances for (moving) through ... the triple crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis that has haunted qualitative work for the past two decades' to Kamberlis and Dimitriadis (2005, p.903). They refer to Michelle Fine's (1998) work on othering in qualitative research. She reminds qualitative researchers of post-colonial critiques of othering to underline the importance of enabling resistance to it, which we can do, she reassures, 'when we construct texts collaboratively'. Kamberlis and Dimitriadis see FGDs as one form of such collaboration. Using the method strategically to inhibit the authority of researchers and to allow participants to take over and own the interview space, they argue, can help researchers avoid both othering and navel-gazing, as well as Haraway's (1991) twin 'god-tricks' of 'relativism' and 'totalisation', so called because they 'deny the stakes in location, embodiment and partial perspective' (cited in Kamberlis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 903-905).

Researching across difference in the majority world

The opportunities the method offers to tackle issues of othering, power relations and the role of the researcher seem especially promising when used in majority-world contexts. Efforts to address the crises of legitimacy and representation identified in 'development research' (Scheyvens and Storey, 2003) over the past two decades have found these same three issues to be more central to methodological rigour for researchers in the majority world, than in social science in general (Staeheli and Lawson, 1994, Bell et al., 1993).

"Who are we for them? Who are they for us?" This is how Pat Caplan summarises positionality. She sees it as one of the most important determining factors in the kind of data researchers generate in developing countries² (Bell et al., 1993). With several fieldwork analyses confirming the impact of positionality on data generation, the debate has since moved beyond reflexive confessions of this impact, and on to questions of *how* it plays out in the research setting, how multiple positionalities can be navigated, and to building said awareness of positionality effects into research design (Henry, 2003, Srivastava, 2006, Rose, 1997, Madge, 1997).

Marsha Henry's struggles with self-representation in India show respondents rather than the researcher deciding who the latter would be in their eyes, and how this decision determines the data that could emerge from the research encounter (Henry, 2003). Prachi Srivastava (2006) similarly describes how she mediated 'multiple positionalities' to achieve 'temporary shared positionalities' with respondents, arguing that 'field identities are multiple and continually mediated constructs in response to the anticipated or experienced perceptions of how participants receive, accept or reject the researcher's positionallites vis-à-vis their own' (214).

It is accumulated field-based analyses such as these that Apentiik and Parpart draw on when they highlight two issues as particularly important for quality in majority-world data generation: power gradients and 'the identities assigned to researchers on the basis of more fixed positions' (Apentiik and Parpart, 2006, p.41).³ The power differential between researcher and respondents intertwines with who the researcher is to the researched. How respondents perceive power relations between them and the researcher flows from who they perceive the researcher to be, and it is their perceptions of both that determine their perceived stake in presenting themselves and the topic in a certain way. In communities where foreigners are associated with aid, respondents are more likely to give whatever answer they think will attract external assistance (ibid.: 37).

Thus FGD methods are primed to address issues that majority-world research literature marks as needing to be addressed. This literature also indicates areas where the method would need to adapt. Desai and Potter stress the cultural contingency of conversation norms, and how in many rural African contexts, respondents' abilities to voice disagreement or independent opinions are subject to social etiquette, which again depends on who is speaking to whom, and their relative positions in the social hierarchy (Desai and Potter, 2006: 40). Janet Momsen points to how in post-socialist and centrally planned countries such as Tanzania, detailed 'factual' information is readily given, but 'requests for personal opinions or ideas are seen as threatening'. Moreover, many respondents from lower status groups are unaccustomed to being asked for their opinion, and so may find researchers' insistence that they share their own ideas on a topic bewildering (Momsen, 2006: 45).

Focus groups in the majority world: Working to the strengths of the method?

Given the method's potential to address fundamental challenges to majority-world research, and the cultural contingency of the interaction on which this potential hinges, it seems reasonable to look to methods texts on majority-world FGDs for how to make the method work to its strengths in majority-world contexts. How can FGDs generate data on opinions where respondents are loath to voice opinions? How do issues of positionality, alterity, conversation norms and power gradients impact efforts to achieve a discussion where respondents interact with one another, challenging, questioning, supporting and expanding on one another's responses? For instance, how does the tendency for respondents to tell the researcher what they think (s)he wants to hear, as deduced from how they see the researcher, and his/her power in relation to them, play out in discussions in rural African communities? And how can FGDs' distinguishing features be mobilised to reduce this 'foreigner effect' on the data?

Unfortunately the first and only methods text on FGDs in majority-world research, Monique Hennink's *International Focus Group Research*, throws little light on such questions (Jakobsen, 2010). Its main contribution is advice on practicalities, as if these cover the difference in using the method in majority-world contexts: meeting outdoors, dealing with uninvited respondents and translating questions. It says little about how the interactive processes on which the method hinges may play out differently in majority-world contexts, and how to handle this. Thus it leaves the need for advice on conducting discussions in a way that both takes into account and addresses the aforementioned challenges in majority-world research, largely unmet.

Vissandjee and colleagues go further in filling the gap on how 'to make focus groups culturally sensitive and competent' (Vissandjee et al., 2002, p.840). However their adaptation of the method to rural India is limited to how respecting local etiquette wins the trust of respondents, making them 'comfortable opening up and sharing' (838). It treats opinions as internal data that are either divulged or not, rather than socially performed according to the audience, influenced by the speaker's perception of whom (s)he is speaking to. They address power relations only between respondents, and only as influencing *whether* individuals 'share'. The influence of these power relations, as well as those of the researcher's positionality⁴, on the nature of the responses given, is not addressed. Asking of the data 'to what extent is this merely what they say to me, based on who I am to them?', and adjusting the FGDs accordingly, requires cultural competence beyond simply conforming to social norms.

Thus a gap can be seen in the literature. Positionality, alterity and steep researcher-researched power gradients are identified both as particularly threatening to data quality in majority-world research, and as potential strengths of the FGDs method (Lloyd-Evans, 2006). However, while *general* FGD literature points to how achieving the method's strengths hinges on *how* the discussions are conducted, considering especially context and conversational norms (Smithson, 2000, Hollander, 2004), *majority-world* FGD texts say little about how to actualise these strengths when context and conversational norms are very different. The prevalence of sub-optimal uses of majority-world FGDs is a result of this gap (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005, Walraven, 1996, Hennink et al., 2005, Hennink, 2007).

The study: Focus grouping for opinions in Tanzania

The focus group study recounted here forms part of a larger research project on attitudes to violence against women and corruption, aimed at exploring the norms and values people refer to when voicing opinions on these two issues. The groups were held in two disparate districts in Tanzania in villages surrounding Kigoma and Arusha towns. Respondents were village residents, and sampling reflected each district's diversity regarding age, sex, socio-economic and educational levels, religion and ethnicity. I was white, female, from a recognised donor country, and had grown up and worked in this and other African countries for over twenty years. All groups were segmented by age and sex, and some by ethnicity, socio-economic status, and acquaintance levels: friends, neighbours, co-operatives and strangers (Morgan, 1997). Each group consisted of eight to ten respondents. Three pilot and eight 'real' discussions were planned; eventually forty were held in twenty villages.

Why the method was chosen

While working with corruption and violence in the region, I had found dominant village discourse both pivotal in case outcomes, and different from what people might think privately, or say to outsiders. I wanted data about what people might say to one another in public: which viewpoints could be voiced, and how they could be presented. Also, 'white-in-Africa' experience in discussing politically correct topics made me concerned about social desirability: I hoped the group context might counteract this. I imagined that whilst interviews would give me what people say *to me*, FGDs would yield data on what people say *to one another*. I also anticipated respondents feeling more 'in the spotlight', anxious about being singled out, in one-on-one interviews than in group discussions⁵.

Thus I chose the method for its group context and interactive nature, to generate the type of data for which it is the most reliable: group norms and understandings (Bloor et al., 2001). I wanted data on attitudes in a social context, not as individually *performed*, but as *performed* to others in the group: precisely the type FGDs generate (Puchta and Potter, 2004). My hope that they would generate data beyond the standard responses to foreigners was also supported by the literature (Lloyd-Evans, 2006, Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001). Nevertheless, despite this support, the first eight discussions failed to exhibit the characteristics for which I had chosen the method. 'Tweaking' the method until it finally addressed these issues of positionality, alterity and power gradients was to take twenty more discussions.

How the method was used

The process behind the first 'failed' FGDs was no less adapted to local norms than Vissandjee's team (2002) recommends. Sampling decisions were based on contextual knowledge gleaned not only from the literature, but also from own experience and a network of local experts. I chose two disparate districts to cover two 'extremes', and peri-urban villages within these as sites that could not be written off as purely 'urban' or 'rural'. Arumeru district represented one of the most well-connected, developed, educated, touristified and researched districts, while the less developed Kigoma Rural district is popularly described as a 'backwater'.

I recruited respondents through village councillors, in deference to bureaucratic procedure. Having followed procedure unquestioningly from capital to village level, I found every village officer equally unquestioning vis-à-vis his superiors' request

to introduce me to whomever I needed for my 'state-approved research'. Vissandjee's team found that soliciting permission from local leaders showed respect towards the community. I found that it put leaders and my respondents at ease. Since I neither needed a random sample, nor believed he could skew the sample, I deferred to the village leader's expectation that he recruit respondents according to my criteria. This assured both the leader and the respondents they were inculpable in cooperating with me.

In each village, I asked to meet with one group of men and one of women according to varying criteria of age and social standing. I invited participants to choose the time and place. At the beginning of each session, I introduced myself and my assistant and explained the purpose of the discussion. On explaining that participation was voluntary, I stressed that I kept no record of who stayed and who left. After the discussion, I paid for refreshments and debriefed with the participants. ⁶

FGDs are often seen as an easy way of getting many people to talk (Parker and Tritter, 2006, Bloor et al., 2001). I found the process of getting the respondents to talk – from access to recruitment to actually meeting with them and asking questions – easy. After responding in culturally appropriate ways throughout the process - from bowing to reprimands at government offices to responding to social cues in village conversations – I found unquestioning goodwill and cooperation among respondents when we finally met. Whilst Western FGD literature recommends factoring no-shows into recruitment, I encountered requests to join. Whilst other white researchers in the area complained of having to 'pay per interview', only one time in forty did I have payment set as a condition for participation⁷. Whilst many of my questions were about violence against women and corrupt leadership, responses did not indicate that these were taboo or even sensitive issues, or even that respondents were hesitant to discredit the leaders who had recruited them.

The clearest suggestion of how effortless it all was, however, was the way the talk flowed. Respondents talked. For an anxious researcher, this was a comforting sign of success. Despite my uncertainties and theirs, when gathered in a group, someone always spoke. Eventually. About something. This confirms the idea of FGDs as deceptively simple.

Problems with the type of data generated

Conducting FGDs in a culturally sensitive way, following existing technical advice, did get respondents talking. However, the first ten discussions left me entirely unconvinced they were generating the type of data for which I chose the method, or the

type that could reliably say anything at all about my research questions. Making the method work to its strengths and the study's purposes in the Tanzanian context required more modifications than respecting local culture.

Rather than discussing informally with one another, respondents answered formally in turn, gradually choosing one 'representative' to speak for them. Rather than sharing their views and opinions, they recounted what actually happened. This was problematic because what people say in a group is not a reliable source of such 'factual information', nor was it easy to discern viewpoints and opinions in these accounts. Also, I found the ethical implications of discussing real local cases of violence and corruption so serious that I stressed before each session that I was there to hear what they thought of the issues, not what actually happened. The following extract from one of the discussions exemplifies these tendencies.

(RESEARCHER: So in such a conflict, can a man be right to discipline his wife?)

JUMA: Many times a man can beat his wife, if they disagree. They can disagree to such an extent that he beats her. One might say, disagree until he beats her. There are some places here where this happens a lot. So –

ASSISTANT : Is it right then? What do you say?

JUMA: Ah.... Yes, ok. ... Well, then ... here, in our African community, we have our African traditions. So if a man is not right, the woman will go to the council of elders. She will tell her story. They will listen. Then they will call the man. He will tell his story. They will do what? –Listen. Then they will decide. This is our African tradition.

RESEARCHER: Thank you So what do you think? In your eyes, is it right sometimes, for a man to discipline his wife? Someone else?

BAKARI: Me, I agree with the previous speaker. He spoke well. It is true. There is disagreement , there is conflict. Especially when times are difficult. Then in a disagreement, it happens. According to our custom, it is not a foot or a hoe, but a hand only. The whip also is used. These are our customs.

EZEKIEL: My turn? I also agree. This is how it is.

PAUL: And me.

PETER: Me too. I agree. It's true. It's our tradition. Now maybe in Europe it's different, but here in Africa, it can happen that a man beats his wife. It happens a lot. Now my addition is, it is because of poverty. When there is no food and no money, what can you do. And here, where there is no good education. Where there is no good education, there are no opportunities. And then, when the disagreement comes – what is there? Nothing. There is nothing. You are here, you can see: this is the state of us here.

MUSA: I agree. It is true. -Ah!

Both I and the goals of the research were frustrated by this discussion. The encounter resembled more a formal panel interview than a group discussion. There seemed to be an understanding among respondents that any differences of opinion should be taken outside: this was the place to present a united, cooperative, orderly and respectable front. As some said, they were, after all, the ones selected to speak. This underlying norm seemed impervious to any verbal attempts by me to set a different tone.

This was problematic since opinions were what I wanted data on. When asked for a normative judgement on wife-beating, respondents gave 'factual' accounts about beating (it happens a lot, it happens when people disagree) and what happened afterwards (the elders) as well as one cause of why it happened (poverty). I could later have analysed these as reflecting the speakers' opinions about beatings ('all beatings are legitimate, or the elders would say otherwise', or 'men cannot be blamed for beating their wives, because they're poor', or 'whatever tradition says, is right'), but I had no reason to assume they reflected opinions. Rather, they seemed to be a deflection of the question by speakers who did not experience the FGD context as one that legitimated the airing of, and disagreeing on opinions. This matches Momsen's (2006) observation from similar settings that 'factual' reports are much more easily elicited than respondents' opinions (p. 46). Regarding Peter's response in particular, it would be a mistake to interpret this as an opinion of poverty justifying beating. It seemed to reflect how he saw me, and the purpose of a conversation with me (to gain sympathy and thereby funding), more than how he saw wife-beating. Thus the issue of positionality was central to the method's initial malfunctioning in Tanzania. What also seemed to be happening was that participants would watch to see if I 'accepted' an answer, and then, relieved, would quickly support that answer, as Ezekiel, Paul and Musa did in this exchange.

While this extract is from a men's group, women seemed even less used to being asked their opinion than men – as found in similar contexts (Momsen, 2006). There were some differences in how men and women understood their roles in the FGDs.

Many women seemed nonplussed that there was no 'task' for them, expecting to follow instructions or to give me practical information I needed. Men had several familiar roles they could step into to expound on social issues, referring to one another as 'speaker', 'representative', 'councillor' and 'comrade'. When I tried to shift the conversation to a more informal tone, one man exclaimed 'I see! Like in the evenings when we brothers go to the coffee place, to drink and talk!' Whilst sitting and talking was a role men had some experience in, women debriefed that 'we never do this: just sit and talk.'

What I found the most problematic, however, was how I seemed to be inducing respondents to present themselves and their communities to me as 'We Africans'. My question of what individuals thought about certain social issues somehow solicited representations of what *the* tradition of an homogenous mass of 'Africans' said, as opposed to 'you Europeans'. Despite having chosen a method whose collaborative nature could 'enable resistance to othering', I had initiated a process that did just the opposite, that produced precisely the target of postcolonial critiques of othering (Fine, 1998, Kamberlis and Dimitriadis, 2005). Instead of participants challenging, adjusting, questioning and re-developing each other's responses, as described in the FGD literature (Morgan, 1997, Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001, Wilkinson, 2006), my groups were producing what Homi Bhabha has unravelled as 'discourses that weave ideologies of "common culture", (...) made coherent by the repression of social divisions' (1990, cited in Fine, 1998: 139). I seemed to be inviting the respondents to present themselves as the African 'other' to my white self (or perhaps vice versa), and to do so as representatives of the entire community.

Thus I faced questions raised by previous researchers concerned with post-colonial representation across difference: How can we incorporate the voices of others without colonising them by replicating the same imperialist discourses? (England, 1994). Whilst 'cultural sensitivity' (Vissandjee et al., 2002) had helped simply to get people together and get them talking, ensuring data quality required engaging with alterity, positionality and power. Doing so yielded entirely converse data – as will be seen in the very last focus group, conducted in the same community and on the same topic as the one cited above.

The power dimension of positionality

I came to see positionality as central to the 'failure' of the initial FGDs, and conventional advice that this can be solved by a skilful deployment of the self – for example by staying long enough to 'blend in' or by emphasising commonalities with the researched – as requiring a blithe disregard for how a steep power gradient may override any such efforts by the researcher⁸.

The aforementioned 'International Focus Group Handbook' claims that

'The deference effect ... (where participants say what they think a moderator wants to hear rather than their own opinion about an issue)... can be avoided by clearly reinforcing to participants at the outset of the discussion that all views are valued and it is participants' own views that are being sought.' (Hennink, 2007: 184)

My experience confuted the belief that positionality is dealt with through self-deployment because I *did* succeed in changing the way the respondents saw me— and the problem remained. Throughout the conversations, I did what would supposedly take care of the 'deference effect'. Long-term residence afforded me more positionalities, and more experience of deploying them, than most Western researchers in Tanzania. I sought a balance between being forthcoming and sociable, and not revealing my own opinions. I stressed aspects of my identity that would not only provide a shared positionality with the respondents, but also complicate the presentation of the African other to the white self. Respondents' de-briefing questions revealed a success in this self-deployment that sometimes exceeded intentions: a group of women who had spoken extensively on how to avoid beatings asked me if I had gathered enough advice to get married now.

Significantly, the most successful self-deployment could not prevent respondents from trying to guess what the 'right' response was, based on who they thought I was, and adjusting what they said accordingly. As my positionality changed, so did their answers. Much of the talk said more about their thoughts on *who I was and how to relate to me*, than about their opinions of the topic, as seen in a group who assigned me a different position:

Q: *So in such a conflict, can a man be right to discipline his wife?*

ALI: *It's true, a man is never right to discipline his wife. Our problem here, as you know, is that many women don't know this. If only we could convince them...!*

JOHN: *What? What's he saying?*

YOSEFU (interrupting, tapping John on the knee): *He's right.*

What is Ali's 'It's true' agreeing with? No-one had said 'a man is wrong to discipline'. I had withheld my opinion, stressing that there were no right or wrong answers. Nevertheless his perception of who I was convinced him this was the thing to say. Visual observations confirmed this sense that what people told me said more about who they thought I was than about my research questions. Respondents would seek eye contact with me as they spoke, even when addressing one another. This seemed either to refer to me – to gauge my reactions to what they were saying as they were saying it – or to defer to me – using facial expressions to excuse themselves if they were wrong. No matter how much I marginalised myself in the room, what was said and how it was said revolved around me and my imagined position. My positionality and opinions – real or imagined, held by me or assigned to me – dominated the discussion and determined the data it generated.

Conventional advice on the 'deference effect' proved inadequate because positionality owes most of its impact to the power gradient between researcher and researched, which in my case was especially and unavoidably steep. No culturally adept self-deployment or opinion-hiding could prevent respondents from *trying* to guess my opinion, or tailoring theirs to who they thought I was. Had my undeniable whiteness not communicated power and privilege, Yusuf and Ali's presumption of the researcher's antiviolence stance would not necessarily lead them to mirror it. FGD respondents in Western contexts with less steep power gradients have responded to that same stance with derision and abuse (Green et al., 1993). Thus it is the power dimension of positionality that makes respondents scan the researcher's identity for 'the answer'. Whether they find it is irrelevant: my positionality still determines the discussion.

In summary, I found that whilst I used FGDs to generate inter-participant opinion exchanges, power dynamics endemic to researching across the minority-world/majority-world boundary produced a very different type of talk: accounts of events, procedures and behaviour as presented to me on behalf of the community. Whilst a researcher usually influences the data, respondents' deferring and referring to my perceived position made me the centre of the discussion. This did not yield the sort of data that FGDs can reliably generate or that answered my research questions.

Tweaking the method to decentre positionality

My main concern in trying to get the FGDs to 'work', therefore, was to decentre myself: to shift the respondents' attention away from *me*, who *I* was, and how to relate to *me*, and over to co-respondents and the discussion topic. I improvised with group exercises and facilitator styles.⁹ The aim was not so much to change the 'Western' method to fit 'local culture' as it was to find ways within the Tanzanian context to achieve the defining characteristics of the method. Four improvisations were particularly effective.

The first of these was asking respondents to share responses with their neighbour first, and then to the group. This had several advantages. Firstly, it made half the respondents commit themselves to a stance before having heard other responses and having watched my reactions to those: it complicated attempts to 'find the answer'. Secondly, it meant that even if respondents did refer to me in plenary, they would mostly be repeating a response that had initially been formulated not to me, but to a peer. Also, it seemed to increase participants' engagement with others' responses, and lower the threshold for the reticent.

I discovered a second effective adjustment as a pair of women in one group spontaneously acted as a team when responding in plenary. I started asking participants to form teams according to their opinion on an issue, and then presenting the arguments for that standpoint, and challenging other teams' arguments. The contrast between respondents' ways of talking during these exercises and during the first FGDs was striking. In this artificial situation, participants who in a more naturalistic discussion were cautious about revealing opinions, self-consciously focusing on the white researcher, could openly challenge each other's opinions. Having a role imposed on one provided a legitimate space for difference, dissent and general deviance from normal rules of behaviour, a space which was filled with creative rhetoric. This confirmed my impression that the 'malfunction' of FGDs was partly due to respondents- especially women- having trouble fitting the exchange of personal opinions on right and wrong into who they should be and how to behave in relation to me.

These role-plays were so successful both in the fun they infused and the interaction they induced, that I incorporated them into all discussions. However the interaction was clearly contrived: were respondents voicing their 'real' opinions? In the following exchange, participants had responded individually to a vignette about a leader accused of corruption, and teamed up with others of similar opinions. Each team then argued for their position, and was challenged in turn by each of the other teams. Sometimes respondents spoke more out of their commitment to a stance than from personal conviction:

ZAKARIAS: '... so in this way, even if the leader truly did those things, the man who accuses him should be chased! Yes.

Questions?'

DAUDI: (grinning) what can I say?

(laughter)

BAKARI: It's your turn, you have to question

DAUDI: 'Ok ... Ah-hah... So. This man who is accusing the leader, maybe he also has money, maybe he can also help people. Then, if you villagers chase him, don't you also chase away that money? '

Daudi at first admitted that he found Zakarias' argument convincing and had no issue with it. It was only when Bakari reminded him it was his role to question it, that he did so. Surely this shows that what people said in my 'new and improved' discussions was not necessarily their 'true opinions', but what the situation – albeit a different situation now – seemed to require of them?

This question illustrates how easily the whole purpose in using FGDs may slip from view. Since it is socially performed and not individually internally held opinions that FGDs generate data on in the first place, then the crux is not whether opinions are 'real,' but *whom* they are performed to (Puchta and Potter, 2004). Daudi seemed clear that his audience was his co-

respondents, and was perfectly 'in tune' with them. As a result, what he eventually chose to say to that audience is critically relevant data, regardless of how it relates to his own internal convictions. The way I interpreted his body language, his 'what can I say?' was a humorous appeal for sympathy, as he sensed it was obvious not only to him but also to others that Zakarias' point was incontestable. The response to his comment – general laughter – confirmed this. When he finally found a counter-argument, it is clear that he was 'performing' it, but it is also clear that it was the 'best shot' of a perspicacious performer, following an evaluation of what counts as a good argument among participants, an evaluation validated by his audience's laughter. Thus the performance yields valuable data on what is socially acceptable or appropriate to say in defence of the given stances.

A third element that helped respondents forget about me and instead exchange opinions with one another was various 'evaluative exercises'¹⁰. Using cards and drawings, I asked people to rank social problems, vote on moral dilemmas, and choose between scenarios. The women who expected to be set a task, and appeared self-conscious when asked just to sit and talk, said they enjoyed this. Also men's groups said they felt they were being consulted on serious issues when the exercises came out. Whilst I specified that I would leave the tape recorder running, having a task to tackle together meant that respondents mostly ignored me, focused on the task, and spoke to one another in a more straightforward manner. For example, in sorting social issues into 'good for society' and 'bad for society', the following exchange accompanied a card on 'leaders favouring their own':

MARIA: Read it.

MIRIAM: 'Leaders favouring their own'.

BAHATI: Is good. Goes here.

TERESIA: Put it with the happy face.

HADIJA: It's bad-

MARIA: No it's good-

HADIJA: No, it's here. It's bad! It's not like they're from here-

BAHATI: Yes they are from here!

HADIJA: The country's leaders? Who?

MARIA: Not them-

HADIJA: This is the country leaders-

TERESIA: The whole country, the ministers?

BAHATI: We need to know whose people.

MARIA: I thought it was our people-

This is a very different discussion from an earlier one on the same topic. There, each response was directed at me, and often implied some case for assistance.

Such exercises generated data on how people evaluated the issues in talk to one another, rather than on how they presented the issues to me. In addition to these very contrived interactions, I tried to decentre myself also from the 'normal' discussions, where participants responded to vignettes and questions. Since the usual self-effacing moderator behaviour did not work, I tried a fourth modification to see what would happen if I removed myself altogether. I interspersed the discussions with *unmoderated* questions:

RESEARCHER: So let's – yes. I want to start with a question. I want to ask you a question, and leave it with you to discuss. Then when you're done, please could you call me in, and then someone summarises the discussion..... is this ok?

WOMEN: It's ok.

RESEARCHER: I will leave you to discuss without me. So the question is this: What kinds of things can cause a conflict between husband and wife? What are the things that can cause a conflict?

ASSISTANT: You understand? What is it that can cause a conflict.

HANNA: That's ok. What causes conflict.

RESEARCHER: So we are leaving, but this thing stays here. It keeps taping your voices.

ELISA: Ok, we'll call you

(Researcher and assistant leave)

NAOMI: So we start. What things?

BAHATI: What was the question?

ELISA: Me too, I didn't understand

SARA : Conflict

HADIJA: What brings conflict between husband and wife

FATOMA: Ah. We should stop it?

SARA: No, we say what brings it. The different things.

BAHATI: Ah, it's just this -

(laughter)

FATOMA: It's just this!

GLORIA: I can answer this

This exchange shows participants tense and self-conscious in my presence, and speaking more freely in my absence. I interpreted the laughter as one of relief, laughing at how nervous they had been, and how simple it really was. As I stepped out, participants could step into the discussion, and take ownership of it. Whilst in the first moderated discussions participants looked to me for cues or for the next question, in discussing the unmoderated questions, participants themselves decided when to wrap up and call me back in. This gave them a feel of the type of interactive discussion the questions called for. When I conducted the first question of a session like this, for the rest of the session, while I was present, participants seemed more relaxed, interacted more, and paid less attention to me.

With all this tweaking, were these still FGDs? Each choice came with costs. During the unmoderated question, the discussion often went off-track, as I was not there to probe or rein it back in. Nor could I encourage equal participation, although the range of voices recorded suggests the group self-managed this aspect. The sharing in pairs limited the development of opinions as the discussion went on. The evaluative exercises limited the range of opinions that could be expressed, and the role-play format may have exaggerated some stances. However neither unmoderated questions nor group exercises form a departure from FGD literature (Morgan, 1996, Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001:12, Bloor et al., 2001: 48-49, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 181). On the contrary, this type of innovation is where 'skeptical enthusiasts' see the most promise for higher quality FGDs (Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001: 201).

Thus after 20 sessions of experimenting, I arrived at an adaptation of the method that avoided the worst of the problems that plagued the first focus groups. What then did these 'successful' discussions look like, and how were the data they generated different from the 'failed' ones?

Bringing out the strengths of the method

Firstly, the groups appeared more heterogeneous. As I was decentred and participants felt at ease to engage with the questions and one another, differences emerged within the group. For example, in discussing bribes to traffic authorities, one man who was a truck driver surprised the rest of the group by having the opposite opinion to theirs. This resulted in an in-depth discussion of work-place dilemmas he faced. Such earnest minority disagreement seemed impossible in the first FGD, where most participants seemed to understand their role as presenting a united and respectable front to me.

Engaging earnestly in the discussion led some participants to change their stance. For example, towards the end of a discussion of justifications for wife-beating, one woman who had first provided several examples of this, and then fallen silent for a while, said 'I'm thinking a little. We're saying the man has the right to beat us if we do these things. We always say this. But when we all say that, don't we support them?'

Another feature that fits with descriptions of the strengths of FGDs is how participants challenged one another. For example, whilst the first FGDs had left me silently wondering whether respondents were just taking their cue from whoever seemed to have given the 'right' answer, in the final FGDs I found respondents calling one another on precisely this:

SIKUJUA: Me too, I say it depends.

MOHAMED: Depends on what?

SIKUJUA: Huh?

MOHAMED: When you say 'it depends', you mean it depends on something.

SIKUJUA: Oh? ... so then - 'it depends'...?

MOHAMED: So just because he said it depends, you also say it depends?

(laughter)

SIKUJUA (laughing) In fact, for me, I think this man did wrong. You cannot treat your own relatives like that. It's wrong.

MOHAMED: So it does not depend on anything.

SIKUJUA: No! It's totally wrong! A man like that-!

MOHAMED: So then don't say it depends.

SIKUJUA: Ah... you know-! He said 'it depends'-!

(laughter)

THOMAS: We cannot hide!

Respondents also challenged one another on expressed viewpoints, although the tone remained politely conciliatory:

BAKARI: '... For this reason, it is not correct at all for a leader to accept gifts from people.'

EZEKIEL: 'If I may be allowed to enter the conversation a little. I ask for permission to oppose you. You see, we're the ones who said something that's a little different from you. Now let's try to understand one another. What if the leader has done so

much for your village, and you give not even one egg? And the other village, they thank him? He'll say why am I getting tired for people who don't want it? Then when the other village gets development, what will you do? That is my question.'

Differences of opinion were often couched in such assuaging preambles. In this sense, the modified FGDs respected local etiquette. However what was different from the first groups was that participants did actually find roles within these general norms of politeness in which it was possible to argue different viewpoints.

Increasing inter-participant interaction and addressing positionality achieved very different conversations from the initial presentation of the 'African other' to the 'White self'. Rather than representing a homogenous group, participants discovered aloud differences among themselves, and within themselves, as they were able to relax and reflect on the topics, pace the discussion, and challenge one another. The opinions they expressed were performed not to me but to one another. Consequently in the last FGD, when I asked about the 'African traditions' related in the first discussion, in the same community, the conversation was very different. The difference is a useful warning against using FGD data as evidence on actual events, and of underestimating the effect of positionality, power gradients and social desirability:

RESEARCHER: 'So what about this tradition of elders, where a woman can go and complain if she has been beaten and it's wrong, like the examples you've been giving?'

MUSA : What?

STEVEN : The council of elders

EZEKIEL: Heh-! (laughter)

STEVEN: Who does that?

MUSA: They cannot

EZEKIEL: I think it is not they cannot. They can complain. But for what?

PATRICK: You're disciplining your wife, and the elders tell you to stop?

PETER: But let's think. What if your wife has a lover who is an elder?

(laughter).

Conclusions

FGDs' minority-world origins do not preclude the method from being useful elsewhere. On the contrary, when deployed rigorously, it can address threats to data quality common in majority-world research. The fieldwork recounted here illustrates this as follows.

Firstly, it points to the implications of *not* paying attention to the extent to which the method actually is generating the type of data it is reliable for, namely interactive data on group norms. The way the article's last excerpt says almost the opposite of the first one epitomises this. The initial FGDs more than matched prevailing majority-world FGD standards, and failed to yield interactive data on social norms. Assuming that they were 'working' simply because people were talking would have resulted in data diametrically opposed to the data produced by a more rigorous use of the method.

Secondly, the article shows the unique - but not automatically realised - potential of FGDs to deal with issues of positionality and power difference. In the fieldwork recounted here, FGDs were used to counter the deference effect of positionality when a steep power gradient rendered any self-deployment futile. Much majority-world research is undertaken across steep power gradients. Unlike one-on-one methods, FGDs allow participants to generate data to one another. Without this group element, the 'decentring' of the researcher that all my tweaking aimed for would not have been feasible: the impetus and audience for the responses would have been removed with the researcher. It was achieving this inter-respondent interaction within local conversational norms that unleashed the method's strengths.

Thirdly, the fieldwork illustrates how FGD interaction can counter another challenge in majority-world research: alterity. The first FGDs, strongly coloured by respondents' concerns about how to relate to me, invited representations of the African 'other'. The tweaked groups produced the hallmarks of the method, such as capturing the complexity and fluidity of opinion, compared to surveys' 'false certainty' (Kotchetkova et al., 2008). As participants questioned their own and others' responses, the FGDs no longer produced Bhabha's deceptively and coercively coherent 'ideologies of common culture' (Fine, 1998: 139).

FGDs can be used rigorously in the majority world. Specifically, rigour involved addressing positionality, alterity and power gradients, and simply ensuring the FGDs displayed the method's defining characteristic: participants discussing among themselves. This required an understanding of the structures and conditions that regulate what can be said and how, and knowing how and when to neutralise or work within these constraints – as well as sheer tenacity to make interaction happen.

NOTES

1 I use the terms 'respondent' and 'participant' interchangeably.

2 Caplan, like most writers on positionality, sees it as determining not only data generation but also data analysis (Bell et al., p.178). However, since the focus of this paper is on a data generation method, the importance of positionality in other parts of the research process are not dealt with here.

3 Apentiik and Parpart's (2006) term 'gradient' is useful here in its implication that the difference between two adjoining fields determines the dynamics where the two meet.

4 Their study is not a case of a minority-world moderator the majority world, in that they employed Indian moderators. Nonetheless, the moderator is still researching across difference, and subject to the very power differentials the authors problematise in relation to group composition.

5 This was confirmed by three attempts at individual interviews, where respondents were visibly distressed and gave short, incoherent and haphazard answers. The same respondents participated with ease in discussions.

6 Most decided to keep the money. Debriefing included their questions for me, and brochures on the topics discussed I had received from local non-profits.

7 I paid 200 shillings (20 cents) to each after the interview, ostensibly for refreshments, without having promised this. Twice this was bargained up to 500. In some places where the respondents seemed poorer than others in their community, I gave assistance. Significantly, this was neither an expectation nor a condition for talking. There are regional traditions for giving from empathy rather than for services rendered.

8 Marsha Henry has made a similar point from her experience of how conventional advice on self-representation may exaggerate the researcher's agency in the research encounter.

⁹ As called for by Barbour and Kitzinger (2001: 201).

¹⁰ Also known as 'enabling and projective techniques' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 126), 'collective tasks' (Barbour and Kitzinger, 2001: 12) and 'focusing exercises' (Bloor and others, 2001: 43).

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