The impact of COVID19 on fieldwork with 'hard to reach' groups: The ups and downs of online focus groups

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Abstract

In January 2020, we began a two-year research project to investigate the process and outcome effectiveness of the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) which oversee the monitoring and management of sexual and violent offenders in the community. A large part of the research involved qualitative fieldwork with practitioners from groups which are notoriously 'hard to reach' for the purposes of research; these included the Police, HM Prison Service, and the National Probation Service (NPS). The onset of the pandemic three months later seemingly made these 'hard to reach' groups even more difficult to access. Exceptional working models scaled back services and simply operating amid the chaos created by the pandemic meant that participation in research was understandably not considered a priority by the agencies we sought to involve.

This paper discusses how, created by the global pandemic, the need for alternative research methods resulted in the adoption of Microsoft Teams as the primary method for research focus groups. Despite the perceived and real drawbacks of no physical communication with participants, Teams evolved into a highly effective way of conducting research with our 'hard to reach' groups. Our experience suggests that this tool is an important one in the armoury of researchers, offering a convenient and more economical way of conducting largescale fieldwork with 'hard to reach' practitioners.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this guide, students should be able to…

- Appreciate the characteristics which make some groups of practitioners 'hard to reach' for the purposes of research

- Understand how the Covid pandemic necessitated a need for alternative research methodology

- Have awareness of how an 'online' research methodology makes 'hard to reach' groups more accessible

- Critically evaluate the usefulness of Microsoft Teams when accessing 'hard to reach' groups

Case Study

Project Overview and Context

Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), introduced in England and Wales under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act, 2000, were specifically designed to improve and strengthen the monitoring of convicted sexual and violent offenders in the community via legislated cooperation between the Police, the NPS and the Prison Service, along with other agencies who have a 'duty to cooperate'. Currently, the number of offenders in England and Wales subject to MAPPA stands at 85,709, representing a 75% increase since 2010 (Ministry of Justice, 2020). This year-on-year increase in caseload, coupled with a series of high-profile offences and subsequent inquiries, (including that of the London Bridge attack (Hall, 2020)), meant the importance of a holistic, evidence-based understanding of the effectiveness of the MAPPA framework was essential.

The aim of the research was to examine the process and outcome effectiveness of MAPPA to provide a robust evidence base to inform decision-making regarding its future structure and operation. Using a mixed methods approach, we firstly, examined the outcome effectiveness of MAPPA, utilising the most current reoffending data for MAPPA offenders. Changes in levels of harm between the original offence for which the offender was adopted under MAPPA and all subsequent proven reoffending were also calculated, utilising the Cambridge Crime Harm Index (Sherman, Neyroud, & Neyroud, 2016). This indicated whether MAPPA was effective in reducing the level of harm caused by subsequent reoffending by MAPPA offenders. Secondly, we investigated the process effectiveness of MAPPA via qualitative research with practitioners in order to identify current, and best practice in MAPPA delivery. It was important that the research captured the views of those who had lived experience of working within the MAPPA framework for a comprehensive understanding of its successes, failures and challenges.

'Hard to reach' groups

As experienced Criminological researchers and having very recently completed a large-scale research project with the Police and the NPS (Mann & Lundrigan, 2020), we were acutely aware that many of the practitioners whose experiences we wanted to reflect in the research were from groups 'hard to reach' for research purposes; most notably, the Police, the NPS and HM Prison Service.

'Hard to reach' groups can mean different things in different contexts. Within Criminological research, we are often referring to individuals who may be marginalised or socially disadvantaged, such as ethnic minorities, the homeless or offenders (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey & Choubak, 2015; Syder, 2013). However, this label is often applied to groups of practitioners

from agencies whose working practices or environments complicate research facilitation; these groups include the Police (Reiner & Newburn, 2010) and Prison Service (Apa, Dhritiman, Mukherejee, Herzig, Koenigsmann, Lowy, & Larson, 2013; Appelbaum, 2008; Liebling, 1999) and in our opinion, the NPS. The difficulties are not in themselves specific to those agencies but are in fact common to many research sites and participants. However, the very nature of their work (Reiner & Newburn, 2010), its competing priorities, the sensitive information, and the vulnerability of the people they manage, tends to amplify common research issues, such as gaining full access, recruiting participants, and timetabling fieldwork.

In our research space, successful studies are not guaranteed by the support of a high-level partner, such as the Ministry of Justice, nor is it assured by receiving appropriate level ethical approval. For us, successful research has to have the support of front-line practitioners who act as both gate keeper and participant (Apa et al., 2013). Unfortunately, in recent years, this lower level of support has become increasing difficult to obtain. Since the financial crisis of 2012, criminal justice agencies have continually had budgets reduced and staff numbers decreased (Millie & Bullock, 2013), whilst both the complexity and the number of offenders has risen. This reality is juxtaposed against an ongoing drive for efficiency and the need 'to do more with less' (Fox Albertson, & Wong, 2013). Interestingly, as a result, criminal justice agencies have greater interest in, and consideration of, academic research which helps to identify 'what works' in relation to cost effective and efficient practice (Lumsden & Goode, 2016; The College of Policing, 2018a). However, the reality is that however well intended or valuable (The College of Policing, 2018a), academic research is often considered a low priority and access is declined due to the resource implications of its facilitation.

Section summary

- The wider project, on which this paper is based, examined the process and outcome effectiveness of the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) in England and Wales

- The experiences of front-line practitioners were essential to understanding the effectiveness of MAPPA

- Some individuals or groups of people are considered 'hard to reach' for the purposes of research. This may be due to marginalisation, or, as within this study, due to the complexities involved in trying to access them for research facilitation.

- The importance of flexible research design is increased when accessing 'hard to reach' groups

Research Design

The aim of the focus group method is to achieve a well-balanced and naturally progressive discussion led by the participants. If this is achieved then the resulting data gathered is grounded in the participants' point of view; something Marshall and Rossman acknowledge, when they state, 'the primary strategy is to capture the deep meaning of experience in their own words' (1999: 61). For the purposes of our research, we believed this method would allow us to gain the practitioner's thoughts, feelings and perspectives on the MAPPA process in a participatory way (Barbour, 2007). Within focus group research an individual's thoughts and ideas are built on or even reversed (Krueger, 2002) by the other group members, producing a multi layered understanding of the subject area and this level of understanding is what we wanted to achieve in our research.

Initially, the move to online focus groups that came about as a result of the national lockdown felt like a setback to the research design. Despite utilising a great deal of technology in our everyday research process, such as Internet based literature searches, audio recordings, and digital transcription (Hooley, Marriott, & Wellens, 2012; Stancanelli, 2010), we were unfamiliar with the use of meeting platforms for the commission of research, despite this being something which many researchers have done for years (Hamilton & Bowers , 2006; Hamilton, 2014; Hooley et al., 2012; Stancanelli, 2010).

It was somewhat of a relief to establish from the wealth of academic material on the online focus group method, that the basic principles of focus group research, such as the recruitment of participants, the creation of a relaxed environment, , the need for clear instructions, and the oversight of a moderator, apply to both the online and face to face method (see Barbour & Morgan, 2017; Gaiser, 2008; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017 for an overview). Armed with this knowledge, we embraced the opportunities presented by online methodology and selected Microsoft Teams as the platform via which our focus groups would take place. Teams was chosen over other methods such as Skype or Zoom simply because it was the platform most frequently used by the researchers and the criminal justice agencies that participated. Had we been conducting research with non-professionals, or offenders themselves, a platform such as WhatsApp, which has a function for group video calls, may have been more appropriate.

Section summary

- Researchers have used online methods of research for many years
- The basic principles of focus group research apply to both online and face to face methods

- The participant and researchers' familiarity with Microsoft Teams was the basis for its selection as the focus group platform

Research Practicalities

Method in Action

We conducted 22 online focus groups with 105 practitioners, between April and July 2021. By this time, most practitioners participating in the research had been utilising Microsoft Teams for approximately 12 months and so were familiar with it; something which may have affected the outcome of Teams utilisation.

Benefits of the online method

Participation

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome in any largescale and complex research project is the recruitment of participants (Far, 2018; Patel, Doku & Tennakoonl, 2003). Access to participants often entails a lengthy process of encouragement and persuasion for which the end goal is convincing practitioners to take time away from their busy schedules to take part. One of the major advantages of the online focus group method, is that it drastically reduced the onerousness of participation (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Stancanelli, 2010).

In previous studies conducted by the research team, practitioners were required to travel to research sites to take part in focus groups and whilst we endeavoured to ensure that sites were as geographically close to the practitioners as possible, some travel was inevitable, substantially adding to the time participants were away from the office. This was often a major consideration in the decision to participate and on many occasions, practitioners

declined to take part as they could not justify a whole day away from their schedule. By contrast, the nature of Teams and the ease of participation this method created was a major incentive for practitioners who felt they could justify 90 minutes away from their working day to participate. As such, the recruitment of participants for the online focus groups was a much easier task than in previous studies we have conducted (Im & Chee, 2006; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Stancanelli, 2010; Tates et al., 2009)

Interestingly, as only 90 minutes of their time was requested and many practitioners could join the focus group from their home PCs or laptops, we had a number of practitioners take part who were officially on annual leave or days off. As well as this low-level time commitment and the eradication of travel to the office which the Teams method provided, some practitioners who were on leave were also encouraged by the fact that cameras could be switched off, negating any requirement for them to appear 'professional'; one practitioner commented that her day off was always a 'pyjama day' and so she would not be utilising her camera.

Another advantage of the online method, which had not emerged from previous literature, was the ability of colleagues to 'stand in' for one another should something important arise which the original participant needed to tend to. The participants came from occupations which are unpredictable and on occasions, certain practitioners were called away with little notice. Had this happened when using face to face research, there would not have been time to arrange for a replacement. However, the accessibility of Teams' meant that colleagues were able to cover those who were required elsewhere, even at the last minute. For example, on one occasion a Prison Service duty Governor was called away during the focus group and her deputy was able to take over immediately rather than that individual having to leave

unreplaced. Whilst the substitution of participants may alter the data collected, providing the role is not too dissimilar from that of the original participant, this benefit , ensures that participant numbers are maintained and flexibility isfor participants is achieved (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Gaiser, 2008; Hamilton, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

Time and Cost

Fieldwork can be a costly part of a research project. In financial terms it often requires travel, accommodation, and subsistence, and in practical terms, it requires weeks and sometimes months to complete. Originally, this project involved significant periods of travel across the country, however the move to an online method for research focus groups immediately cut this cost, as no travel, accommodation or subsistence costs were required; a finding supported by others who have utilised the online method for research (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Gaiser, 2008; Lo Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). As it was also possible to conduct more than one focus group in a day, the time required to complete the fieldwork was dramatically reduced.

Reciprocity

Within research, there is often a desire to give something back to the individuals taking part, and as Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton, (2001) explain, reciprocity in research is very useful for gaining access to particular settings. Arguably then, reciprocity is even more important when researching practitioners who are under pressure and overworked, such as the 'hard to reach' groups in our research. Traditionally, the focus group method would have seen practitioners from similar geographical areas come together at a research site where, by way of thanks for participation, refreshments would have been provided. However, the online

nature of research meant that this form of reciprocity was not possible and as such, it was hoped that offering participants the opportunity to be listened to and be heard, would be sufficient recompense. As Corbin and Morse (2003:335) state,

> 'when research is conducted with sensitivity and guided by ethics, it becomes a process with benefits to both participants and researchers'.

Whilst this was indeed the case and many participants expressed their enjoyment of taking part in the research, the real reciprocity interestingly came from the method itself. An online focus group is not limited by geography and being able to bring geographically dispersed individuals together, provided a much-needed opportunity for the participants to meet (albeit not physically) colleagues and counterparts from different areas of the country and discussion of practice in different areas benefitted the participants as much as it did the researchers. The online method temporarily eradicated the siloed nature of participant's roles and provided a forum where discussion of best practice could take place.

Surveillance

Within focus groups, interviews, or other forms of face to face research, participants can naturally feel nervous or anxious about participation. Within the focus group environment this is often due to the requirement to talk in front of others, which some individuals may be less comfortable with. For individuals who are less confident or less experienced in their role, the prospect of sitting with unknown colleagues can also create anxiety and it is important that in such cases, the researcher does everything possible to put participants at ease and prevent them from feeling watched or 'under surveillance' by others.

Utilising Teams meant that although the participants were brought together in an online space, they remained in the familiar surroundings of either their home or office, which may

have promoted a more relaxed atmosphere. Whilst some participants were more engaged and contributed more than others, the online method enabled all participants to 'find their voice' and contribute at some point in the discussion. As Holt (2010: 15) discusses in relation to her use of the telephone in narrative interview research, not being in the same physical space as researchers and other participants can reduce the 'intensity of the 'surveillant other' thereby eradicating some of the stress which can be felt and enabling a relaxed environment, conducive to open and honest discussion.

Section summary

- The online method of focus group facilitation is much less onerous for participants in terms of travel and attendance

- The method offers flexibility by allowing participants to 'stand in' for one another

- Participation in online focus groups is not restricted by geographical location

- The method is highly cost effective

- Participants can feel more relaxed as they are able to take part from a familiar environment such as their home or office,

Limitations of the online method

Rapport and Etiquette

When utilising any qualitative method, a vital component to obtaining good data is securing a rapport with participants. The state that researchers strive to reach has been called a 'conversation with a purpose' (Kahn & Cannell, 1957: 149). Rapport, as Roller and Lavrakas acknowledge, is incredibly difficult to achieve when conducting online focus groups, because as they explain,

'the moderator does not have direct visual or verbal contact with the participants and therefore has less control over the rapport-building process' (2015: 150).

We were mindful from the outset that the development of rapport would be more difficult to achieve when utilising Teams, because physical proximity to the participants was not possible. In previous focus group research, the face to face greeting of participants on arrival and the informal conversations held over a cup of tea or coffee before the start of sessions, had been an important part of the process for us as researchers. However, without the possibility of this, there were several things we were able to do both prior to, and during, the focus groups, which ensured the best possible rapport was achieved.

From the outset that we communicated a real passion, and a genuine interest in the research. This began when first approaching potential participants and continued to play an important part throughout the focus group sessions themselves (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). By conveying to participants, that this was a hugely important piece of research, which we were highly committed to and passionate about, they were encouraged to put forward their thoughts and experiences on what was being discussed, and to also offer new ideas or lines of enquiry which we may not have considered.

Reassurance and guidance for participants was also important in encouraging rapport and a relaxed environment within which to conduct the session (Krueger & Casey, 2009). It was important from the first communication, that we clearly set out exactly what would happen during the sessions; how long the session would last; who would be present; who else would be taking part, and what would be expected of the participants during the focus group sessions. These clear guidelines helped to eradicate the uncertainty of the research

participation and this, coupled with the maintenance of contact with participants up until the day the focus group took place, ensured they were clear and confident about the process.

The absence of non-verbal communication and cues within online facilitated research, means that the traditional strategies for developing rapport and managing participation are lost; it is not possible to place a shy or less confident participant directly opposite the moderator so that reassuring eye contact can be made; nor can the placement of an overly vocal or domineering participant beside the moderator, be used to reduce their dominance (Krueger and Casey, 2009). This lack of control over the physical space and interaction of participants when utilising the online method for focus group research is well cited (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006; Roller & Lavrakas; 2015; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Nonverbal communication, particularly the use of eye contact, is essential in signaling turn-taking in conversational settings (Jokinen, 2010). Subtle cues allow for smooth interactions which respect the agreed etiquette of conversation and discussion. When holding discussions in an online environment, these tacit but highly important cues are not present, and so left to their own devices, participants can end up talking over each other. It was therefore essential that we, as moderators identified an alternative way to manage interactions and encourage turn taking and this was successfully achieved by utilising the 'raise hand' tool in Microsoft Teams. The 'raise hand' tool was used by participants when they wished to speak; the moderators were then notified by the presence of a hand icon next to the name or face of the participant and they could then invite that individual to speak next. This provided a way in which interactions could be managed and participants could be given time to complete what they were saying, uninterrupted. This tool also proved very useful in managing more vocal members of the groups; rather like Krueger and Casey's (2009) strategy of using close

proximity to the moderator, domineering members could be better managed by having to wait until all other members had spoken, thus preventing dominance of the discussion.

We were keen to ensure that service user perspectives were included in our evaluation of the MAPPA framework and so we planned to conduct qualitative interviews with MAPPA offenders (violent and sexual offenders). These represented an incredibly 'hard to reach' group, however during previous research projects, the National Probation Service had worked as gatekeepers to such individuals, and it had been possible to recruit individuals who wished to discuss their experiences. Naturally the pandemic ruled out face to face interviews and having completed a number of the online focus groups with practitioners, we were armed with sufficient knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of the method. After careful consideration, we decided not to utilise Microsoft Teams for research with offenders. The method, whilst sufficiently flexible for use with practitioners, would not have allowed the researchers to sufficiently develop the trust and rapport which becomes even more essential when researching potentially vulnerable and marginalised groups (Liamputtong, 2007; von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017). It was felt that the experience may not be as positive for these individuals, as face to face research and concerns around the security of the platform, fuelled by a number of high-profile cases in the press relating to similar platforms (Guardian, 2020), may at best prevent them from fully entering into meaningful discussions and at worst, lead to their identification as a sexual or violent offender. Researching this group of individuals required a much more traditional method, thus providing a perfect example of a 'hard to reach' group, for whom this method is not appropriate.

Internet Connectivity

The global pandemic saw Internet use increase between 40% and 100% across the globe (De, Padney & Pal, 2020), with online conferencing platforms seeing a 30% increase in use (Branscombe, 2020). This surge in the use of digital platforms naturally placed strain on service provision, culminating in one of the main limitations of the online focus group method, connectivity issues (Carter, Shih, Williams, Degeling, & Mooney-Somers, 2021; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Problems created by insufficient bandwidth, poor signal and too many devices dialled up to the Internet, meant many participants experienced issues whilst taking part in the focus groups. The most commonly occurring issue was having a signal insufficient to run both microphone and camera functions. Whilst this had little effect when one or two participants had to turn off their camera, there were a number of focus groups where our facilitation was directed at a screen comprised entirely of faceless black boxes.

Within the traditional focus groups method, it is recommended that the facilitator quickly develops an unguarded relationship with participants which helps instill a feeling of ease and encourages the elicitation of accurate and complete information (Roller & Lavrakis, 2015). This also adds to rapport which is developed between moderator and participants. It is, however, very difficult to achieve when there is no way of seeing those with whom you are communicating. As discussed earlier, it is commonly agreed that a significant percentage of our communication is nonverbal, meaning that body language, hand gestures, tone of voice and facial expressions are, to a large extent, responsible for communicating our messages (Tecau & Tescasiu, 2015). Within a traditional focus group , these nonverbal cues are an additional part of the data and may add significance to the speech or silence of a participant. However, when all physical cues are eradicated, and without the reassurance provided by the

occasional nod of a head or the clear concentration on the face of participants, conducting focus groups in this way felt, at times, like a very lonely process.

Despite this obvious limitation, extra effort was made by moderators to 'ramp up' enthusiasm, and strongly reiterate the informal nature of the focus group discussions at the start of these sessions. It was felt that if the facilitator could communicate an increased sense of interest in, and gratitude towards, the participants, the loss of a visual connection could be overcome. This was indeed the case in many sessions where practitioners engaged well despite having cameras switched off. It was of course impossible to know whether these participants were fully engaged during the focus groups and a disclosure by one participant that he had made an entire shepherd's pie during a previous meeting where he had his camera turned off, did little to provide reassurance. It was, however, a humorous reflection of the strange new world within which we were conducting research.

Internet Access

HM Prison Service emerged as the 'poor relation' compared to other criminal justice agencies in terms of practitioner's access to both Microsoft Teams and to laptops or PCs which could be utilised for focus group participation. Whilst all other agencies included in the research had been using Microsoft Teams to conduct day to day business for at least 12 months, this was a very new way of working for Prison Service practitioners and this proved very challenging for the moderator; something Mirick & Wladkowski (2019) discuss. 'Teething problems' such as setting up cameras, remembering to switch microphones on and off and a general self-consciousness of participants, sometimes created a very difficult environment for discussion. Whilst the moderator of this particular session continually attempted to engage participants, there was a consistent lack of willingness to contribute. It

must be noted that this was in no way a reflection of the participants commitment to the research, but rather it was a product of the somewhat 'alien' environment into which these 12 individuals had been placed.

An underfunded Prison Service also meant that participants had struggled to find laptops or PCs which could subvert the security systems in place within such a secure environment and connect to the 'outside' Internet for the purposes of focus group participation. This created delays in attendance and one participant, who missed the first five minutes of the session, disclosed that she had had to borrow a laptop from the Prison Governor who fortunately had no immediate need for it. Other participants from the same establishments were forced to use one device, cramming up to three people in a small office to participate. Such consequences of inadequate provision of internet enabled devices for Prison Service staff created 'stress' and inconvenience for participants which may affect their future decisions to take part in research, adding an additional layer of difficulty when trying to access this 'hard to reach' group.

Security concerns

In research, anonymity and confidentiality are essential ethical considerations (British Society of Criminology, 2021). In order to encourage free and frank discussion, where possible, participants need to be assured that anything they discuss will not be traced back to them and that their identity will not be disclosed (although this can be more difficult in focus group research (Sim & Waterfield, 2019)). The online method of focus groups raised a unique difficulty to the maintenance of confidentiality, namely Alexa or other such SMART assistant devices. With nearly a quarter of all UK households owning a SMART assistant (Mobile

Marketing, 2021), the listening and searching capabilities of these devices can create issues for individuals holding confidential discussions in a home setting.

During one focus group session, the Alexa of a participant who was speaking, was activated and began searching the Internet for possible answers to the question the device thought he was asking. Whilst there were no ramifications from Alexa's presence, it does raise the important issue that online research can create ethical and security concerns which would not be present in face to face research and that careful consideration should be given to these issues.

Section summary

- Rapport is more difficult to achieve when utilising the online focus group method

- The loss of non-verbal communication and physical control over the environment creates difficulties which need to be overcome

- The 'raise hand' icon in Microsoft Teams, is an effective way of managing participation

- The method may not be appropriate for highly sensitive research topics or participants who require greater levels of reassurance

- The method raises unique ethical and security concerns

Practical Lessons Learned

Throughout this research project we have learned the importance of reflexivity in the methodological approach taken to research with 'hard to reach' groups. If we wish to continue understanding such practitioners, we need to be inventive and more flexible in our

approach to fieldwork design (Stancanelli, 2010) because their schedules, locations and priorities are not always conducive to traditional research access and participation.

We have learnt to be unrestricted by the perfectionism of 'traditional' research where researcher and participants come together in the same setting. The barriers which we had envisaged were simply not present in this new post-pandemic world where practitioners are well versed in online communication and engagement.

On a more practical level, our utilisation of the online method did highlight several key issues which should be considered before commencing online focus group research. Firstly, we have learnt that the online focus groups work most successfully when there are between three and six participants. This is different to the six to eight participants recommended for face to face focus groups (Barbour, 2007). Within the online forum, the capacity for the moderator to monitor the visual cues of the participants is limited by the size of the screen, the fewer participants there are, the larger the size of the box they are in, and thus the easier it is for the moderator to manage and engage with participants (Kite & Phongsavan, 2017).

Finally, when running online focus groups using Teams, it is essential to have an additional research team member manning the chat box. The 'chat' tool in Teams has become an important place for people to share their thoughts and ideas as an aside to the main meeting or discussion and when conducting online research using Microsoft Teams, the chat box becomes full of rich data which can both add substance to the findings or add value to the direction of discussion (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). Having a second person observing the ongoing 'chat' means that no discussion thread or point is lost, as the chat moderator can gently interrupt the main moderator with points which they have identified as interesting.

Section summary

- Reflexivity of method is important when accessing 'hard to reach' groups

- The optimum number of participants is reduced when utilising the online focus group method

- It is essential to have a second moderator or research team member to monitor the chat function when utilising Microsoft Teams for focus group research

Conclusion

This research project began with trepidation about our inability to conduct focus groups in a traditional manner and the unknown effect this would have on our access to, and communication with, participants from 'hard to reach' groups. Eighteen months later, we have learnt that the world's we inhabit as social researchers are complex, unpredictable and volatile and we must be ready to access those worlds in any way possible.

This case study has highlighted that the online focus group method removed some of the traditional blockers to research participation and the flexibility of the method encouraged a greater number of practitioners to take part. The online method proved cost effective and efficient, and whilst we cannot know what discussions would have been achieved in a traditional face to face focus group setting, the richness and validity of the data obtained was seemingly unaffected.

We hope that our study has demonstrated that being flexible and inventive in fieldwork design, whether by choice or by circumstances beyond one's control, can lead to advances in methodology and the identification of new and improved ways of working. The online focus

group method was born out of short-term necessity but will provide a long-term solution to accessing some 'hard to reach' groups.

Discussion Questions

1. This research involved participants from several 'hard to reach' groups. What other groups could be considered 'hard to reach' for research purposes?

2. What other methodology could have been used to access the 'hard to reach' participants in this study? Consider the benefits and limitations of each method proposed.

3. Have you engaged with 'hard to reach' groups in your own research? How did you overcome some of the blockers to participation for these individuals?

4. In what other ways has the pandemic affected the way we conduct qualitative research? Consider to what extent these effects can be considered permanent changes.

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Which of the following groups would NOT be considered hard to reach?

A. Sex offenders

B. Prison officers

C. University students (CORRECT)

2. The number of participants required for good focus group discussion when utilising the online method should be:

A. More than for face to face focus groups

B. Less than for face to face focus groups (CORRECT)

C. The same as for face to face focus groups

3. What new concern did we identify in our case study?

A. Security concerns where households have a SMART device (CORRECT)

B. Not being present in the same room as participants

C. Participants not being able to see each other when cameras were turned off

Further Reading

- Krueger, R.A. (2002). Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews. Available at https://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf

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- Upadhyay, U.D., Lipkovich, H.(2020) Using online technologies to improve diversity and inclusion in cognitive interviews with young people. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 20, 159. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-020-01024-9

Web Resources

- Focus group research: Steps to conduct a focus group. Available at https://www.questionpro.com/blog/focus-group/

- 7 Lessons Learned About Recruiting Hard-to-Reach Populations for Qualitative Research. Available at: https://www.insightsassociation.org/article/7-lessons-learned-about-recruiting-hard-reach-populations-qualitative-research

- Toolkit for conducting focus groups. Available at:

  https://ctb.ku.edu/sites/default/files/chapter_files/toolkitforconductingfocusgroups-omni.pdf

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