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## Religious Research: Recommending Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as a Primary Instrument of Data Collection

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### Abstract

Focus group discussions have long been used in social sciences, marketing and health sciences research. Although Christian organizations – churches, denominations, sects, and cults – break themselves into subgroups which conduce focus group discussions, this instrument is little known in religious research in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, explores the use of focus groups in Christian religious research. Qualitative instruments – documents, and observation were used for data collection. Results show that almost nothing is known about focus groups in religious research. We, therefore, recommend FGD for religious research, emphasizing its usefulness, operational procedures, analysis methods, uses and limitations.

**Key Words:** Focus Group Discussion; Primary Instrument; Data Collection, Religious Research

### Introduction

The hundreds of Christian religious bodies in Nigeria are categorized along a continuum with church at one end and sect at the other end. One can describe any actual Christian religious organization in relations to these two ideal types by locating it on the church–sect continuum. One would also acknowledge the existence of hundreds of cults in Nigeria that claim Christianity. A *church* is a type of religious organization that is well integrated into the larger society (Macionis, 2010). According to Lindsey and Beach (2004), a church is an inclusive religious body that brings together a moral community of believers in formalized worship and accommodates itself to the larger secular world. It is an adaptive organization. An *ecclesia* or state religion is a church formally allied with the state.

A *denomination*, on the other hand, is a church, independent of the state that recognizes religious pluralism. Denominations exist in nations like Nigeria that separate religion from state. *Sect*, another general religious form, is a type of religious organization that stands apart from the larger society. Sect members have rigid religious convictions and deny the beliefs of others. A *cult*, on the other hand is a religious organization that is largely outside a society's cultural traditions.

In Nigeria, Christian organizations, be it church, denomination or sect, members are organized into different sub-groups. These sub-groups are organized into guilds, youth, men's, children's group, choristers, prayer groups, elders, and so forth, depending on the church, denomination or sect. These sub-groups, composed

of members with similar experiences or background, are fertile grounds for the use of focus group discussions as primary instrument of collecting data in religious research. That is, the existence of these sub-groups conduce the use of focus group discussion as instrument of data collection.

### **Focus group discussion (FGD): Epistemological Issues**

Focus group discussion is an instrument of data collection not only in the social sciences but also in marketing and health sciences. Although focus group discussion is little known in the arts, including religion, it has long existed as a qualitative research method. The first focus group discussions were created at the bureau of applied social science research in the United States of America by the then Associate Director, Robert K. Merton (Henderson, 2009). The term itself “focus group discussion” was coined by psychologist and Marketing expert, Earnest Ditcher (Michael, 2003).

A focus group discussion is a group discussion that gathers together people from similar background or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest to the researcher (Dawson, Manderson & Tallo, 1993). Folch-Lyon and Trost (1990) defined focus group discussion as a technique in which a small number of respondents talk about a topic of special interest to an investigation under the guidance of a moderator or facilitator. Obikeze (1990) sees it as a research method that brings together a small group to discuss and express their views on some topics that are of interest to a given research. According to Krueger (1988) and Krueger and Casey (2009) focus group discussion is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment.

Focus group discussion is not a group interview in which questions are thrown to a group and individual members provide answers. It is a form of data collection method in which there are several participants, in addition to the moderator/facilitator. There is emphasis on the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic. The accent is on interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2001). Bryman (2001) comments that focus group discussion leads to greater probing of “why people feel the way they do” than individual interviews. Theoretically, focus group discussion fits well with aspects of symbolic interaction theory because it offer the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meaning around it (Bryman, 2001; Haralambos& Holborn,2004).

With the emphasis on group interaction, Macionis (2010) defined focus group discussion as a type of survey in which a small number of people representing a target population are asked for their opinion about some issues or product. Focus group discussion is, in a nutshell, a form of data gathering technique in which a group of people are asked questions about their perception, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, idea or issue. Questions are asked in interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other

group members. It enables the researcher to question several individuals systematically and simultaneously. Focus group discussion uses the dynamic of a group, if well facilitated, to encourage people to reveal more of their beliefs, opinions, emotions and behaviour (Heggenhougen & Draper (1990).

Focus group discussion is focused because it focuses on a particular area of interest. It does not usually cover a large range of issues, but allows the researcher to explore one or two topics in a greater detail. Focus group discussions are also focused because the participants usually share a common characteristic. The characteristic may be age, sex, educational background, religion or something directly related to the topic (Dawson, Manderson & Tallo, 1993). The common characteristics encourage a group to speak more freely about the topic without fear of being judged by others adjudged to be superior, more expert or more conservative. The strength of focus group discussion lies in

Allowing the participants to agree or disagree with one another so that it provides an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of beliefs, opinions and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variations that exist in a particular community in terms of their beliefs, their experiences and practices.

### **Usefulness in Meeting Research Objectives**

It is strange that focus group discussion is little known in religious research. Focus group discussion has long become useful instruments in meeting social, health, and management research objective. Although researchers are encouraged not to use focus group discussions as their only source of usability data, Okpoko and Eze (2005) however, contend that focus group discussions can be used either as a self-contained means of data collection or as a supplement to both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Focus group discussions can be used by researcher in different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science management sciences and health sciences. It is frequently used by World Health Organization in studying health-related issues in poor countries. Focus group discussions are also useful in meeting specific research objectives. For example, in “Silent Racism” Barbara Trepagenier used focus group discussions to examine the persistence of racism among “well meaning white people” (Trepagenier, 2006). William Gameson used focus group discussions to examine how U.S citizens frame their view of political issues (Gawson, 1992). Because they centre on particular topic and take relatively little time, focus group discussions are typically regarded as an in-dept research technique. However, the technique has been successfully used for extended discussions. According to Krueger (2009), focus groups can be used to elicit information for social programmes of various types. It can be used to provide information before, during, and after a programme or service has been provided. Focus groups are useful in planning, needs assessment, asset analysis, and programme design as it enables one to determine the perception of potential cliental (Okpoko & Eze, 2005). It provides useful tools for reorienting an on-going

programme in order to enhance its efficiency or performance. It can be used for programme evaluation.

### **Meeting Religious Research Objectives**

In this era of religious boom (although obviously without accompanying religiosity and spirituality) in which desperate “gospel dealers” manipulate the religious environment to again followers, focus group discussion can be exploited to meet the objectives of religious research. Researchers can use focus group

Discussion to understand factors that strength worshipper in the “Truth”. Researchers, working for the gospel dealers, can equally use focus group discussions to understand the implications of the anomic situation on desperate folks in order to exploit them. Specifically focus group discussion can be used in meeting the following religious research objectives:

*i Appreciate the significance and meaning of religious metaphors:* Religions including Christianity are full of metaphors. Metaphors are figures of speech by which a thing is spoken of as being that which it only resembles. In the bible, the holy book of Christians, Jesus and earlier prophets used metaphors copiously in their illustrations. The parables are examples. Preachers give varied interpretations of these metaphors sometimes misleading followers. Focus group discussion can be used to know how believers understand these metaphors, and to ascertain the implication of these understanding on religious tolerance or fanaticism and ultimately on their beliefs systems.

*ii* Focus group discussions offer possibility for religious researchers to *explore the gap between what people say and what they do*. In Christendom, as in most religions, what they say, what they profess, what they are taught and what they read in the bible and teach. They say many godly and ethically sound things. However, in practice behaviour in private life and interpersonal relationship do not correlate with what they say, teach and are taught. People say many ethically good things but do very little. Why is this so? Focus group discussion is a very good method for exploring these differences. A believer may be reluctant to discuss these contradictions during an in-dept interview where the main dynamic occurs primarily between researcher and the participant. But in a focus group discussion, where interactions occur between participants themselves rather than with the researcher, the participants are likely to be more open about the divergence and the reasons why do they not practice what they say or teach.

*iii* Focus group discussions permit *researchers in religions to search for reasons why particular views are held by adherents of some religious bodies*. For example sect members have rigid religious convictions and deny the beliefs of others. Cults hold practices that are outside a society’s cultural traditions. Focus group discussions, if carried out appropriately enable researchers to probe into how understandings, beliefs and convictions differ.

*iv* Focus group discussion is a useful technique in meeting religious research objectives **when the researcher does not have a dept of knowledge about the Participants**. The discussions provide rich and detailed information about feelings, thoughts, understandings, perceptions, and impressions of people in their own words. Focus group discussions enable a religious researcher to investigate fanatics and die- hard sect members and other permissive organizations. The method is a flexible research tool and so can be applied to elicit information from any topic, from divers groups of people, and in diverse settings (Stewart Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

*V* In religious research, focus group discussion is **ideal in studying people who find one-on-one and face-to-face interaction intimidating or scary**. In church halls or under trees focus group discussions offer them a safe environment where they can share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same socioeconomic, ethnic and gender backgrounds. Focus group discussions are ideal for studying people from religious minorities.

*Vi* Focus group discussions are also valuable in **investigating value issues**. Christian religions are faced with the challenges of dealing with controversial issues such as abortion, gay marriage, lesbianism, polygamy, male patriarchy, fanaticism; religious intolerance etc. Focus group discussions permit researchers to understand popular opinion on these issues. One great advantage of the focus group discussions is their ability to cultivate people's responses to events as they evolve (Barbour, 2007). Mass media accounts of issues may be speculative, lacks methodological foundation, and fail to give adequate consideration to potential variability in response to issues. Focus group discussions are appropriate in understanding people's position on such controversial issues.

*Vii* Focus group discussions are also useful technique in **understanding point of religious bias and in studying religious prejudices**. Focus group discussions provide avenues for clarifying religious biases. Prejudices religious groups hold against others are best studied using the technique of focus discussion.

*Viii* **To ascertain doctrines members are not comfortable with and areas that need reform**, focus group discussion is an ideal technique. When people discuss in their traditional setting they are able to discuss issues they are not comfortable with.

*ix* **Formulation of research hypothesis** is an important step in good research. Data from focus group discussions help in meeting this research objective. Data gotten from focus group discussions are also used in developing interviews schedules and questionnaires. In religious research these are instruments, used in carrying out extensive surveys.

### **Composition and Group Selection**

Authors vary from one another in terms of recommended size of participants for a focus group discussion session. Babbie (2010) recommends a typical size of between five (5) and fifteen (15). Dawson et al (1993) recommend eight participants as a good number. Obikeze (1990) recommends between seven and ten

persons per group. For Heggenhougen and Drapper (1990), between six and twelve persons constitute an ideal number of participants per discussion session. It is generally recommended that the composition be manageable and also adequate to produce the desired result. According to Morgan (1988), small groups run the risk of being less productive and more costly. The problem with productivity stems from sensitivity to the dynamics among individual participants. On the other hand large groups can break up into small conversations among neighbours around the table. So the number of participants in a discussion session should be manageable but also capable of producing the desired result. Between 8 and 12 is ideal.

Participants in focus group discussion are not likely to be selected or chosen through rigorous probability-sampling methods. Participants do not statistically represent any meaningful population. The simplest and common method for selecting participants or group members is called purposive or judgmental or convenience sampling. This means that you select those members of the Christian community who you think will provide you with the best information. For example, if you are investigating how young widows cope in the Christian community. It would seem more convenient to select young widows or those related to the widows in the same Christian community. If you do not understand the body very well, do not be reluctant to ask church leaders to guide you in selection. Never rely on your own ideas especially when studying members' attitudes and beliefs.

People talk more openly if they are in a group of people who have the same background or experiences. Focus group discussions are discussions among people with similar characteristics. So it is important to ensure that participants in any one group have something in common with one another. That common characteristic or experience should be relevant to the study. If you bring together "Christian mothers" and young girls to form a discussion group, the girls will not be very forth-coming for fear of being judged by the more elderly mothers. Differences in backgrounds and experience obviously hinder openness of discussion within the group. With this in mind, you need to think about the status of participants in the religious body - either socio-economic status, sex, age and so on- considering which characteristics might most influence a free and natural discussion.

Concerning contacting the participants, it is advisable you observe the local custom of the area, this time the church. This will involve contacting the local/church leaders first. Then provide an explanation for the study, and gain permission to work in the area. If you approach such leaders appropriately, they are sure to help you locate individuals for the focus group discussion. Depending on logistics of gaining access, it is ideal to notify the participants the week before and then provide a reminder the day before (Dawson et al, 1993). However, in some cases participants have been successfully recruited one hour before the session. In religious research, it is necessary you consider the weekly activities of the group. It is also advisable that when the participants are contacted for the first time, they

should be told about the study, without actually giving details. Let them understand that you are there to learn from them.

### **Administration and Operational Procedure**

Besides the constitution of the discussion group described above, the research team, made up of the moderator, the observer or note taker, conducts the research. The moderator, who is often the researcher and team leader, helps the group discuss in a natural discussion. The moderator is aided by a pre-prepared question guide that is used to ask very general questions of the group. The focus group guide is only an outline of the themes that will be discussed by the group. The questions are flexible enough to allow the group to take the discussion in any way it chooses. The moderator provides enough structure and direction to prevent the discussion moving away from the original topic to be studied. The moderator also ensures that no one or two group members dominate in the discussion. He uses his skill to ensure that, if possible, all group members participate in the discussion, because without this, one or two participants will dominate, and this does not generate reliable data.

An observer or note taker performs the duty of recording key issues that are raised in the discussion session. He also records other factors that may influence the interpretation of information. This involves noting down the responses from the group, and observing and documenting any non-verbal messages that could indicate how a group feels about the topic under discussion (Dawson et al, 1993). The observer may also help the moderator if necessary –He may point out areas that are not well explored, questions missed, or suggest areas that could be investigated. Nevertheless, the observer should not be especially obvious to the group.

In some cases, religious researchers using focus group discussion technique may conduct focus group discussion in a language that is different from that of the researcher, or, that in which information will be analyzed and reported. Dawson et al (1993) recommend that a native speaker be used to conduct the focus group discussions. However, in more formal research projects the researcher will still want to moderate the sessions. Here he will need translation assistance. Translation can, however, make the natural flow of discussion between the moderator and the participants extremely difficult. Conducting a focus group discussion with a direct translation of each participant to the moderator reduces the flow of discussion, and often this means that the session simply becomes a focus group interview, where a question is asked and any group member answers,

To overcome this translation circumstance, it is necessary to have two moderators - controlling moderator and moderator translator, an observer and a translator. The moderator translator is adequately trained to be the session moderator, and to some degree directed by the controlling moderator. The controlling moderator has the final say about what questions are added or dropped from the question guide but he should allow the translator moderator a reasonable amount of freedom in leading the discussion. The translator is expected to keep the

controlling moderator and observer/ note taker informed of the entire session. He provides summary translation of response. The observer is there to listen, look and take notes as they are translated by the translator.

It is necessary to note that an electronic tape recorder and camera are essential tools in conducting focus group discussions. The recorder records everything that is said and is useful in transcription and final analysis. The camera takes photo or video of the groups in process.

### **Analysis of Data**

Analysis of focus group discussion data is an on-going process. The analysis begins as soon as you enter the field or begin the project, and continues until you write the final report. It is important to note this. If you leave the analysis to the very end, you would discover large gaps in your results and at that stage it would be too late to correct any problem you have discovered. Early and continuous analysis serves three main purposes:

- i. It enables the study to focus quickly on the main issues that are important to the participants, and then explore these issues more closely;
- ii. it helps to check that the focus group discussions are being conducted in the best possible way; and
- iii. it enables the researcher to check that the information he requires to meet the project objectives is actually being collected (Dawson et al, 1993; Obikeze, 1990; and Okpoko & Eze, 2005).

In the process of the discussion, the moderator and the observer try to listen to and consider inconsistent, vague, cryptic comments and probe for clearer understanding (Okpoko & Eze, 2005). They also observe the facial expressions and tone change of the speakers and make and make some judgments as to the meaning of these (Obikeze, 1990). At the end of the discussion session, all data recorded are transcribed and organized in readiness for final analysis, interpretation and reporting.

It is expedient to use name tags to identify each participant. This is important since participants may not always introduce themselves any time they want to contribute to the discussion. If a particular comment is made several times in the discussion process, name tags enable the moderator, during analysis to know whether it was made by one participant or by several participants. During analysis name tags also help to the moderator to associate key issues with individual participants.

According to Okpoko and Eze (2005), the actual analysis of focus group discussion data involves the following:

- (a) Transcription of the tape for each group discussion;
- (b) Listening to the tapes with the transcription in front to address the connotations of some comments;
- (c) Deciding on the coding categories;
- (d) Organizing the report probably under topic headings or question by question format;

- (e) Comparing and contrasting one group session to another; and
- (f) Describing and interpreting the findings by drawing on past religious, anthropological, historical, economic, political and other relevant researches.

There are therefore two levels of interpretation in the analysis of FGD. The first level has to do with how to deduce what people actually mean from what they say. The second level is assessing the implication of what they say in relation to the problem on hand. In FGD analysis no attempt is made to qualify the contributions of members. It is rather normal to make such statements as “all the group members”, “most of the group members”, “a few of the group members”, “a majority of the group members only one of the discussion members were-of the opinion”, spoke in favour of --- (Obikeze, 1990; Hedge, 1985; Okpoko & Eze, 2005).

#### **Uses and Limitations of FGD**

In religious research, focus group discussion can serve the following purposes:

- i. Exploratory Studies: Focus group discussions are a valuable method in exploring the depth and nuances of opinions regarding doctrines and belief issues.
- ii. Understand differences in Perspectives: It is said “a thousand monks, a thousand religions”. Focus group discussions can be good method in understanding differences in religious perspectives.
- iii. Focus group discussion can be very useful in understanding what factors influence opinions or behaviours among members of a given group.
- iv. Focus group can also be used to learn about participants by observing their interactions.
- v. If focus group discussions are conducted early in a research project, then hypotheses might be tested using other methods.
- vi. Focus group discussions are valuable in designing good questionnaires to test how strongly members beliefs are, attitudes and opinion are held by a religious community. And they can also be used to explain findings from a survey questionnaire.
- vii. Focus group discussions are also an excellent method in obtaining information from illiterate religious groups

#### **Limitations**

Some research topics are obviously not suitable for focus group discussions. Some of such topics that are unsuitable for focus group environment are:

- i. Personal or sensitive issues: Topics which are too personal or sensitive to respondents are not conducive for the use of focus group discussions. Such topics include infidelity, idolatry, living with HIV/AIDS, infertility, financial status, abortion, and so on. Such topics are better studied using other methods such as in-depth interviews.
- ii. When a researcher needs statistical information about an entire population, focus group discussion may not be the appropriate technique.
- iii. When you are studying an emotionally charge group such as religious fanatics, prejudiced sects, focus group discussions may not be appropriate.

- iv. Focus group discussions may not be appropriate when confidentiality cannot be ensured, in matters that demand confidentiality personal interview or in-dept interview would be more appropriate.
- vi. A researcher who does not have the required skills to conduct and analyze focus group discussion should not use it.

### Conclusion

The fore-going shows that focus group discussion which has long been used in other disciplines can be used to meet religious research objectives. In using focus group discussions in institutional settings (such as church, fellowships) people may be reluctant to express their opinions and personal experiences in front of colleagues. So be cautions to know the type of data you intend to generate. Also bear in mind that in religious research, focus group discussion can paint a picture of what is accepted in a religious community rather than what is actually practiced.

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