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# THE MULTISTAGE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

A RELEVANT AND FRUITFUL METHOD IN ACTION RESEARCH  
BASED ON A CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY PERSPECTIVE

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to describe and reflect upon the use of multistage focus group interviews in research. This type of focus group interviews have received only scarce attention in research articles. However, it has proved to be a relevant and fruitful method in various collaborative research designs. This article draws on experiences from a research project: "Promotive and preventive mental health care in the local community" (PHIL), and is exemplified by a sub-study: "Dialogues on basic values in community mental health care" (The Value Study). The aim of the sub-study was to investigate, clarify and increase the users' and professionals' consciousness of the basic values underpinning the aims of community mental health care.

The overall research design of the main PHIL-project and several of its sub-studies is action research applying a co-operative inquiry perspective. The dialogical nature of this research strategy was the main reason for making use of multistage focus group interviews. The multistage focus group is characterised by the same group exploring a focused problem, theme or phenomenon in depth through several meetings. Through these dialogues, there are possibilities to 'elevate' the participants' experiences to a higher level of abstraction. Thus, the potential utility value of the knowledge exceeds the concrete situation in which it is created. The article illustrates the method's practical and methodological implications.

### Key words

Co-operative inquiry, multistage focus group interview, values, knowledge dialogues, mental health care

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## INTRODUCTION

Focus group interviews have gained considerable popularity in contemporary health care research. The method is a way of collecting and creating data based on dialogue related to a certain theme decided beforehand. It is particularly suitable when inquiring into peoples' experiences, views, desired goals or difficulties (Tillgren & Wallin, 1999), or when searching for deeper understanding of phenomena, opinions and attitudes connected to special issues in a group (Maunsbach & Dehlholm-Lambertsen, 1997). It combines elements of group dynamics and a qualitative approach to produce good data quality (Morgan, 1997; Morrison & Peoples, 1999).

Usually, the researcher decides the problem statement or theme to be focused. During the interview, the group dynamics are observed and registered in the field notes. Differences of opinions as well as consensus and divergence of views and experiences are explored. The objective is not to reach unanimous understanding, but rather that the final result of the inquiry should incorporate breadth, variations and nuances in a holistic presentation. To achieve this objective, the research literature recommends a minimum of three different groups

The aim of this article is to describe and reflect upon the use of the multistage focus group interview. This type of focus groups have received relatively scarce attention in research articles (Morgan, 1997). However, it has proved to be a relevant and fruitful method in various collaborative research designs (Hummelvoll & Severinsson, 2005; Mæhlum, 2005; Steyaert & Lisor, 2005; Heron & Reason, 2006; Granerud & Severinsson, 2006; Kjøsberg, 2007). There is, however, a need for articles that more explicitly describe the use of multistage

focus group interviews, that is, a clarification of both the methodological and practical application of the method. Therefore, the present article draws on experiences and methodological reflections from a research project: "PHIL: Promotive and preventive mental health care in the local community" (Holte & Hummelvoll, 2004; Beston et al., 2007) and is exemplified by a sub-study: "Dialogues on basic values in community mental health care" – *hereafter*: The Value Study (Hummelvoll, 2006a).

## CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY

The overall research design of the main project PHIL including The Value study is action research applying a co-operative inquiry perspective. This is one of several variations of action research. Action research can be considered as a catch-all concept, which might fail to communicate the activity going on. In what follows, some main aspects of co-operative inquiry are briefly outlined.

Co-operative inquiry is based on a humanistic and holistic view (Reason & Heron, 1986). Even though this research strategy is classified as action research, Reason (1998) holds that it would be more precise to consider it as a family of interrelated methods characterised by their experiential, participative and action orientation. While traditional health research seeks to create knowledge-for-understanding, the focus of participatory research is primarily concerned with developing knowledge-for-action. Participatory research is characterised by a bottom-up approach with the focus on locally defined priorities and perspectives. The main feature of this research strategy is not the methods used, but is rather connected to the researcher's attitudes, which in

turn decide how and by whom the research is formulated and implemented. The main difference between this approach and the more traditional modes of action research has to do with where power and influence is located in the various stages of the research process (Elden & Chisholm, 1993). Characteristic of participatory action research is that it is reflexive, flexible and process-oriented in contrast to more linear designs of most conventional sciences. Local knowledge and local views are investigated to increase the possibilities for developing relevant knowledge. A main feature of participatory research is the use of traditional methods in new ways with action aims together with local participants. The degree of participation varies from periodical involvement in parts of the project, to full participation throughout the whole research process (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Co-operative inquiry is developed as a reaction against positivistic research methods that are viewed as unsuitable when researching *with* people because the subjects' self-determination is undermined. Traditional scientific methods like experiments, surveys and structured observations aim intentionally to exclude the subjects from all choices connected to the research process (Reason, 1994). This restricts them from influencing the choice of methods and participating in the creative thinking that is required to give meaning to the results. In co-operative inquiry, all those involved are regarded as self-directed persons, contributing both to creative thinking and to research action. The methodology rests on three reciprocal, coherent aspects, namely: Participatory and holistic knowing, critical subjectivity and knowledge in action. This approach to knowledge development in practice passes through four relatively characteristic phases where

the participants are both *co-researchers* (they contribute with their thinking and decisions in creating ideas, planning and implementing the project and drawing conclusions from their experiences) and *co-subjects* who partake in the subject matter of the research (Reason & Heron 1986; Hummelvoll, 2006b).

### MULTISTAGE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

In the PHIL-project, multistage focus groups have proved to be favourable in involving professionals and users in the process of acting as co-researchers. The method has been used in several sub-studies because it harmonises well with the reflective processes which personnel and users in one urban and one rural municipality have participated in during four years.

The multistage focus group is characterised by the same group exploring a certain problem, theme or phenomenon through several meetings. Morgan (1997) explains some of the effects of multistage groups as follows:

"As the group members get to know each other, a sense of rapport is built, individual biographies and preferences are learned, and a sense of shared history develops. These "longitudinal groups" thus raise a variety of issues that do not occur in the typical "one-shot" use of focus groups." (p. 69)

The method could be conceived as inquiring knowledge dialogues that focus on experiential material. Through these dialogues, there are possibilities to 'elevate' the participants' experiences to a higher level of abstraction. Thus, the potential utility value of the knowledge exceeds the concrete situation in

which it is created.

The method resembles what Heron & Reason (2006) describe as “co-operative inquiry groups”. The main difference is that this method has an explicit action-orientation, and that the process of inquiry contains cycles of action and reflection. The participants take the moderator function in turns, or a researcher starts the process and then leaves it to the group to take joint responsibility for the further progress of inquiry.

In multistage focus groups, the researcher functions as moderator and leads the knowledge dialogue throughout the whole process. The researcher decides the theme of inquiry and then successively elaborates on it together with the participants. Compared to traditional focus group interviews, the group feeling establishes itself through both interaction and increased knowledge of each other. A calmer atmosphere than if “all things” should be said in only one interview session, often characterises the inquiry. Consequently, the focused theme gradually enriches by adding new perspectives and nuances by means of examples from practice and experiences made in the period between the interviews. Additional meetings contribute to exploring experiences and counter-experiences. This presupposes development of trust amongst the co-researchers (i.e. the participants), appreciation of divergent views and staying open-minded by allowing one’s own views be put to test.

#### *Mobility of group membership*

An essential feature of multistage focus groups is that the persons participating in the first group might change in subsequent meetings. This happens because the inquiry process extends over a period of time and

hence some of the original participants are unable to attend at the following meeting. Therefore, one or two new members can join the group in the second or third session. This has proved to be an asset because alternative opinions or perspectives of the new members can challenge the group-effect, marked by more or less pressure against consensus (Heron & Reason, 2006, p. 148). Thus, the group dynamics might be stimulated and the inquiry vitalised by deepening the understanding of the focused theme. However, in order to secure the continuity of the group, it is important to keep the group size so large and stable that the core process of the knowledge development is maintained.

#### **Preparation**

##### *Information on the research project*

The first preparation consists of clarifying the aim of the project and the research problem. The aim of The Value Study was to investigate, clarify and increase the users’ and professionals’ consciousness of the basic values underpinning the aims of community mental health care. Making values explicit, is often the first step in action research in order to promote common understanding of the values on which practice should be guided, and which the research collaboration are trying to realise (Nolan & Grant, 1993). Based on this clarification, research questions are operationalised into a brief interview guide. This information is included in a research proposal and submitted to relevant official bodies (e.g. data inspectorate and committee for research ethics). The participants receive written information on the aim of the study, interested parties involved, who is leading the research, the theme of investigation, the

research method and finally stating that the participation is voluntary with the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time during the process.

*The interview guide*

Even though the researcher usually decides the theme of inquiry in advance and develops an open interview guide, the co-researchers (i.e. the participants) will influence the *foci* during the course of the research. In The Value Study, the interview guide focused on the following:

- What is the meaning of the concepts mental health, ill-health and mental health care?
- What is the general impression of the basic values for health and social care in the municipality?
- How should the basic values guide the collaboration between professionals and users?
- What functions do the basic values have in the daily work?

*Participants*

The next step is to determine the sample of participants. As in other types of qualitative research, purposive sampling is used. It is necessary that an invitation to participate in the research is sent to potential participants in advance of the first meeting. In The Value Study, the local project coordinators in the two municipalities suggested the sample. In addition, the user organisation Mental Health chose participants who had personal experiences from community mental health care, and who could represent a wider user perspective. A letter was sent to the potential

participants informing about the project and the time and place for the initial meeting. It contained a reply slip stating voluntary participation based on informed consent.

In The Value Study, four focus group interviews were implemented in each municipality over two years. In total 28 persons participated. Given that community mental health care is dependent on user involvement and interdisciplinary collaboration, it was important that the group composition reflected this breadth of experiences and perspectives. In the intervening periods, preliminary results were presented half-yearly in seminars for community mental health care staff and discussed in dialogue-based teaching sessions (2 hours every other week). In this form of teaching, both posing questions related to practice-based problem situations and giving preliminary answers are equal components.

**Implementation**

In what follows, an outline of the research process is presented.

*First interview*

The duration of the interview is usually 1.5-2 hours. The moderator (i.e. the researcher) starts the interview by informing about the method, explaining the moderator's and the observer's (co-moderator) roles and stating the theme of inquiry. The theme and the interview guide are distributed to the participants in advance to make it possible to start reflecting on the theme. The co-researchers present themselves and tell briefly about their expectations. To give everybody the opportunity to express him/herself early in the process, the moderator poses an opening question that the participants answer in turn.

This circular questioning can be repeated later in the interview if only a few persons are active – and especially if somebody tends to dominate. However, one should be cautious about overdoing the circular questioning because it may hamper the development of the group dynamics.

The moderator has a double role; leader of conversation and ‘advanced secretary’ (i.e. not merely referring but also analysing data). This implies to stimulate the conversation so that everybody is heard, and to support the investigation by asking for exemplification, elaboration and to look for relationships between phenomena and concepts. The moderator must be neither too controlling nor letting the conversation loose so that the focus slips away. Memos from the content of the conversation are written. The observer’s role is to observe and to make notes of how the group’s inner life develops. During the interview, time-outs are taken to present thematic summaries so that the co-researchers can confirm or correct the comprehension or amplify essential points.

The interview proceeds where there is more information to get. Flexibility is required in order to allow some sidetracks and ‘excursions’ from the theme. Such detours may give a new and interesting angle to the theme. On termination, a summary is presented and commented on by the group. Until the next meeting, the co-researchers are encouraged to seek for experiences and reflect upon the focused theme. Thus, the method has an implicit action component that makes multistage focus groups well suited as part of a co-operative inquiry design.

*Aftermath with preliminary analysis*

After the interview, the moderator and the

observer review the content of the conversation, assess aspects of the group dynamics, extract main issues of the inquiry and locate analytical traces worth following up in the next interview. A self-reflective evaluation is essential related to how the joint leadership has functioned, and how their comments and non-verbal attitudes affected the development of the interview. This reflexivity is necessary in all qualitative research, and is strengthened in this methodical approach by having two leaders present giving each other feedback.

Besides taking field notes, it is usual to make a sound-recording of the interview. Some choose to note themes and issues while listening to the tape several times, others may transcribe the interview verbatim followed by a first step of qualitative content analysis. As ‘advanced secretaries’ the researchers write a summary which is presented to the co-researchers at the following meeting asking for recognition and/or amplifications.

*Second interview*

Experiences and reflections gained in the intermediate period are emphasised to see what meaning these have had to improve the understanding of the focused theme. At this point examples given are more appropriate because the co-researchers are familiar with the stipulative definition of the theme. Then the group proceeds by dealing with the unanswered questions from the first interview, or starting with the questions based on the researchers’ analytical traces that were revealed from the preliminary analysis.

*New aftermath and further analysis*

Having ended the second interview with

a summary, the same procedure follows: Reviewing field notes, transcribing and listening to the interview and noting themes supported by key quotes. The group dynamics are recorded with special emphasis on to what extent group-thinking conceals real variations of views. The new transcript is viewed in relation to the first interview in order to get a comprehensive picture and to look for emerging patterns and different understandings of the theme. A thematic summary supported by quotes is written, together with analytical traces to be followed up the next meeting.

#### *Nth interview*

How many interviews are necessary, has to be assessed in relation to when the researchers and the co-researchers realise that saturation is achieved. This means that no new aspects appear or that further inquiries are unlikely to provide additional precision of the theme. In order to sustain the co-researchers' motivation, it is essential that the moderator is a "good hermeneutician" who enhances appropriate flexibility in the conversation, i.e. achieving a sensitive balance between challenge and support. The motivation to carry on with the inquiry until reaching saturation is strengthened by the co-researchers upholding an inquiring attitude, a safe group atmosphere and an engaging conversation.

#### **Concerning analysis**

When analysing the interviews, the question is whether the individual or the group is the unit of analysis (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Our experience is that the most fruitful approach is to vary between letting the group and the individual serve as focus of analysis.

An important step in the analysis is examining areas within the focused theme where either consensus or disagreement prevails. The analysis should clarify if the consensus is real or results from dominating persons or from self-censoring by participants holding alternative viewpoints. Field notes about group dynamics will be useful for assessing the basis of the consensus.

Both researchers read the transcripts from The Value Study several times in order to get an overall view of the interview contents. The moderator carried out a tentative hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis of the first interview as described by Barbosa da Silva (1996) and Hummelvoll & Barbosa da Silva (1998), which the observer later commented on and refined. One of the participants from the user organisation did the same. Based on this analysis, themes that needed further investigation were amplified and presented in the second interview. Interpretation of the material was done by exploring which main themes, sub-themes and patterns that appeared. Unanimous views as well as majority and minority experiences and standpoints were illuminated by abstractions and concrete illustrations related to the content of the themes as described by Kitinger (1995) and Malterud (2005). Then the interpretation was written as text including examples of quotes. The focus group members received the text with questions about the validity of the researchers' understanding. Based on this feedback some refinements were made.

#### **Dissemination**

The last step in the research is publishing the results. This is an important part of cooperative inquiry in order to disseminate the results to a wider audience. This means that

the locally developed knowledge should be investigated to see if it adds substantially to the body of general knowledge related to the focused theme (peer-review) and if the knowledge could also be used outside the local context. However, working papers and reports serve primarily a local action purpose. This denotes that the primary aim of the knowledge development is to contribute to renewed insight of the studied theme relevant to the local field of practice and in this way have a utility value.

The aim of The Value Study was to clarify the basic values of community mental health care that the participants could agree with and use as a touchstone for assessing quality of services. Consequently, the articulated basic values were regularly introduced in the dialogue-based teaching sessions related to different themes in both municipalities.

In order to shorten the interval between the focus group inquiry and when the communicative and pragmatic validity was to be tested, working papers (milestone documentation focusing mainly on preliminary results) were published – one for each municipality (Kaatorp, Holte & Hummelvoll, 2003; Ottosen, Holte & Hummelvoll, 2003). These working papers contained questions for further inquiry into the findings' relevance and contained blank pages to be used by the participants and others for personal notes and reflections.

To protect participants' anonymity, presentations of individual accounts should be done very carefully. However, this does not imply that the participants should not recognise quotes in the presentation. Such recognition can be conceived as an expression of intersubjective validity. Our experience is that it is precisely this recognition of the co-researchers' own concepts,

well-articulated statements or metaphors that are experienced as acknowledging. This acknowledgement has to do with the feeling of being an active contributor in the development of knowledge. Reading recognisable working papers and reports seems to strengthen the experience of personal and professional competence.

Based on the two working papers, the moderator made a comparative re-analysis of the contents of the working papers from the two municipalities, which resulted in an article in a journal of mental health care (Hummelvoll, 2006a).

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Validity in co-operative inquiry rests on good quality, a critical attitude, reflexivity and of well-informed appraisals of the participants as co-researchers. This is called critical subjectivity (Reason, 1994) implying that researchers do not have to suppress their personal, living knowledge in the search for objectivity, but are able to build on it, and develop it. Further, critical subjectivity means being aware of biases and accounting for them when presenting the results. Thus, this critical attitude involves a self-reflective attention in the research process.

An adjacent bias of multistage focus group interviews is pressure towards consensus, which means that the group expresses common understanding and attitudes when in fact divergent opinions exist. Whether this bias is prominent or not, can be assessed by considering to which extent statements and attitudes are countered or experiences are met with nuances and counter-experiences.

In total 28 persons participated in the focus groups. Four interviews were carried



out in both municipalities over two years. The number of participants in each group varied (6-10) and was within the recommended size (4-12). Two parallel multistage focus groups were established (in conventional focus group method a minimum of three are suggested, Tilgren & Wallin, 1999). The groups were composed of health and social leaders, employees from various services and members of the user organisation Mental Health. Most participants had attended the dialogue-based teaching programme (i.e. the intervention). Morgan (1997) underlines that the more homogeneous the population is, the fewer number of groups are needed. This is relevant for traditional focus groups, which usually meet only once. However, our aim was to refine the reflections on basic values in community mental health care and to take these reflections further into dialogue-based teachings related to different themes which the professionals wished to understand more deeply. The services should thereby be tested against the values that the professionals and users conjointly had arrived at during their focus group inquiries.

The communicative validity is connected to what extent the results and conclusions from the inquiry are recognised as valid for others with experiences from the theme. There is reason to suppose that the results from The Value Study at large are recognised as valid also for those working with community mental health care in other settings.

In research directed towards persons, the propositional knowledge stemming from the research conclusions has to be derived from and rooted in the subjects' experiential and practical knowledge. The co-researchers had the opportunity to read and comment upon the analysis. The staff who did not partici-

pate in the focus groups, expressed recognition and acceptance of the basic values that had appeared from the inquiries during dialogue-based teachings and seminars (concept validity) and the attitudes following the value clarification. Pragmatic validity is an expression of to what extent the usefulness of the knowledge is demonstrated by being implemented in changes of attitudes and behaviours, and if the knowledge can be used to improve practice (Kvale, 1994). In this connection, the result from the study will be valid if it can be employed in further discussions, and if it is thought of as relevant and supportive in daily work when values are in conflict or a new direction is needed.

In light of the general experiences from the various sub-studies of the PHIL-project, it seems that participating in the multistage focus group interviews has been a positive experience: "I had a rather strange and unusual feeling of being listened to – taken seriously even though I represent a different field of work. It has been instructive to get an insight into this form of knowledge development" (Co-researcher in The Value Study).

Three aspects support this experience: 1. It is an exciting and informative process that creates involvement; 2. The group process stimulates the sharing of experiences and gives new perspectives on practice; 3. The in-depth focusing leads to a searching for meaningful words and expressions catching nuances of the theme under study.

In the final article "Dialogues on basic values in community mental health care", the following reflection is presented:

Such long-lasting dialogues between health- and social service leaders, user representatives and multidisciplinary groups can give impor-

tant insight into the theme under inquiry, and promote a clarifying process that illuminates and actualises valuable mental health care. This rather free resumé of the conversations does not do justice to the engagement, depth and breath of views that has been brought forth. The process of consciousness-raising and the establishment of a forum for value-focused talks have probably been just as essential as the written result. (Hummelvoll, 2006a, p. 127).

This reflection shows a positive side-effect of multistage focus groups, namely that the conversation in itself, going on through several meetings, can contribute to a community of communication between the different parties participating. A new arena is created for meaningful and fruitful talks across the division between employees and users. Thus, the focus group methodology itself might add to a broader communicative practice that can be implemented as an integral part of the mental health services' ambitions of being conscious of basic values when modelling the services.

Two parallel multistage focus groups were conducted in The Value Study. It is of course possible to have more parallel groups which follow their own process – and then make a comparative analysis related to the same focused theme. This makes it possible to include and test concepts and comprehensions from one group to the other, thus assessing the validity of concepts and preliminary analyses. In this connection, the “travelling capacity of concepts” is investigated (i.e. having power to inform and explain the concepts outside the context they originated from). However, if there are more than two parallel multistage focus groups, there is a danger that the amount of data will become unmanageable and thereby

result in a superficial analysis. If the main objective is to search for variations of views, then conventional focus groups should be used. Multistage focus groups aim primarily at depth – and to develop propositional and experiential knowledge that can be tested against its explaining and guiding power in practice. When doing action research, it is advisable not to include more groups than needed for making it possible to do a thorough inquiry and analysis.

### **CONCLUSION**

The multistage focus group interview is a qualitative research method well suited for being a part of action research designs. The method seems to have an activating effect on members' participation in the inquiry of experiences and knowledge being hitherto largely unarticulated. It is especially relevant when investigating and illuminating complex problem statements and situations in practice, including ethical dilemmas. The participation is experienced as personally engaging due to the possibility to inquire in depth into problem statements connected to the research theme. It is also appreciated because the co-researchers play an active and necessary role in the process of creating knowledge relevant to practice.

Since the point of reference for multistage focus groups lies in individual experiences, feelings, thoughts and valuations, the co-researchers become much more aware of each other, which enhance a sense of community. The method harmonises well with the dialogue-oriented teaching that the staff in the PHIL-project have participated in during the project period. Partaking in multistage focus groups has a positive effect on the participants by making them

conscious of their own practice. Besides the knowledge developmental function of the focus group in a research context, this mode of knowledge dialogue stimulates co-learning by the dialogical character of the method. This "free space" created in the focus group makes it possible to highlight and elaborate concepts inherent in the work situation.

The multistage focus group method is a constructivistic process where the co-researchers verbalise their practical knowledge, thus contributing to understanding their practice better by in-depth inquiries. This seems to be the main reason for experiencing the participation as rewarding and meaningful.

Long-lasting dialogues between professional leaders, user representatives and multidisciplinary groups, as in the case of The Value Study, can promote a process that clarifies and actualises valuable mental health work. The final article will not yield justice to the engagement, depth and breath in the views presented during the interviews. The mere consciousness-raising process, and the establishment of a forum for value-focused conversation, has probably been just as important as the written result. In a project using a co-operative inquiry design, what is learned through the knowledge dialogues of the research will be profitable in itself and can lead to value clarifications with a changing of attitudes and practice as a result (Hummelvoll, 2003). Finally, multi-stage focus groups should not be chosen from a conception that this method is time saving. On the contrary, the method should rather be characterised as demanding and time consuming. However, the gain in form of new knowledge with practical relevance is within reach.

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