

## TECHNIQUE OF FOCUS GROUP IN QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION: EXPERIENCE REPORT

### A TÉCNICA DE GRUPO FOCAL NA COLETA DE DADOS QUALITATIVOS: RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA TÉCNICA DE GRUPO FOCAL DE RECOGIDA DE DATOS CUALITATIVOS: INFORME DE EXPERIENCIA

Mirelle Inácio Soares <sup>1</sup>  
Sílvia Helena Henriques Camelo <sup>2</sup>  
Zélia Marilda Rodrigues Resck <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> RN. Doctoral student. University of São Paulo-USP, Nursing School of Ribeirão Preto-EERP, Graduate Program in Inter-unit Nursing. Ribeirão Preto, SP – Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> RN. PhD in Science. Professor. USP-EERP, Department of General and Specialized Nursing. Ribeirão Preto, SP – Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> RN. PhD in Sciences. Professor. Federal University of Alfenas – UNIFAL, School of Nursing. Alfenas, MG – Brazil.

Corresponding author: Mirelle Inácio Soares. E-mail: mirelleenfermagem@gmail.com  
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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To present the experience of the researchers with the focal group technique used in qualitative research. Description of the experience and discussion: the description of the experience, the planning and organization of the focus group has a direct impact on the data collected, schematically showing the steps used in the process of technical development. In this sense, the work focuses on describing relevant points for data collection including the awareness of the participants, environmental organization and composition as well as conducting focus groups and analysis of data, allowing participants to have their attention fully directed to the group activities. Noteworthy are the positions of the moderator and observer in the group and the importance of ensuring a participatory discussion of a particular topic. Final considerations: the focus group technique is no simple task, as it requires from researchers the appropriate attitudes for deepening of the meanings and subjectivity of participants about the issues surrounding their work process.

**Keywords:** Focus Groups; Nursing Research; Qualitative Research; Investigative Techniques.

## RESUMO

**Objetivos:** apresentar a experiência das pesquisadoras com a técnica de grupo focal utilizada em pesquisa qualitativa. **Descrição da experiência e discussão:** a descrição da experiência, o planejamento e a organização do grupo focal impacta diretamente nos dados coletados, apresentando esquematicamente as etapas utilizadas no processo do desenvolvimento da técnica. Nesse sentido, o trabalho se concentra em descrever pontos relevantes para a coleta de dados, entre eles a sensibilização dos participantes, a organização e composição do ambiente, bem como a condução dos grupos focais e análise dos dados, permitindo que os participantes tenham sua atenção totalmente direcionada para as atividades grupais. Destacam-se as posições do moderador e do observador no grupo e a importância de se garantir uma discussão participativa acerca de determinado tema. **Considerações finais:** a técnica de grupo focal não é tarefa simples, uma vez que exige dos pesquisadores atitudes adequadas para o aprofundamento acerca dos significados e subjetividade dos participantes a respeito dos aspectos que envolvem seu processo de trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** Grupos Focais; Pesquisa em Enfermagem; Pesquisa Qualitativa; Técnicas de Pesquisa.

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## RESUMEN

*En este estudio se relata la experiencia de las investigadoras con la técnica de grupo focal utilizada en la investigación cualitativa. Se describe la experiencia, la planificación y la organización del grupo focal que tiene un impacto directo en los datos recogidos. También se muestran esquemáticamente las etapas del desarrollo técnico. En este sentido, el trabajo se centra en describir los puntos relevantes para la recogida de datos, incluyendo el conocimiento de los participantes, la organización y composición del ambiente y la conducción de los grupos focales y análisis de datos, permitiéndoles a los participantes mantener la atención en las actividades grupales. Se destacan la postura del moderador y del observador en el grupo y la importancia de garantizar la discusión participativa de un tema en particular. La técnica de grupo focal no es una tarea sencilla ya que exige de los investigadores actitudes adecuadas para profundizar en los significados y la subjetividad de los participantes sobre asuntos relacionados con su proceso de trabajo. Palabras clave: Grupos Focales; Investigación en Enfermería; Investigación Cualitativa; Técnicas de Investigación.*

## INTRODUCTION

This article resulted from the dissertation entitled "Nursing care systematization (NCS): instrument for the nursing work process in the care management" held in a Federal University of Minas Gerais.<sup>1</sup> This qualitative study had as specific objectives to identify the facilitating and challenging mechanisms of the implementation of the NCS in the nursing work practice; analyze the management and care models that guide the practice experienced by nurses as well as characterize the nurses' knowledge on NCS, with regard to their experiences in academy and the different meanings imposed on it in the exercise of their professional practice.

Thus, as the study involved a socio-historical perspective of the participants and had hermeneutic-dialectic guidance, the data allowed to raise different views on the subject, in order to grasp the uniqueness of views of the working world of the participating nurses. At the same time, it was expected to understand in depth the behavior of the group in face of its work process, justifying the use of focus group (FG) technique.

The FG is a research technique of the exploratory qualitative methodology that seeks to grasp attitudes and opinions of the participants in relation to the subject of research, also favors the integration of the group of subjects and encourages consistent responses and new and original ideas. This type of research technique allows the researcher know *on site* the perceptions of the research participants. The results, in turn, are obtained directly from the lines coming from the group's reports, when it describes their perceptions about the investigated theme.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the FG is defined as research technique that makes possible the researcher to bring together, in one place and over a given period of time, certain amount of participants that consist in the study participants with the aim of collecting, from dialogue and debate with and among participants, information on a particular topic.<sup>3</sup>

In this perspective, the GF enables the expression of subjectivity of the subjects, given that he is directed when there is interest in understanding the various ideas, questions and behavior of different groups interviewed, as well as analyze the

factors that favor or impede the motivations of participants in its operating context.<sup>4</sup>

From this premise, this technique is due to the opportunity to engage participants in a unique moment to contextualize, reflect and analyze on what is purposed to be investigated, in an interactive process that generates different views, opinions, criticisms and suggestions, stemmed from discussions motivated by guiding questions.

In the area of nursing, authors have found that group techniques, with some emphasis on focus groups, have been exploited on a large scale by researchers for researches of qualitative nature.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the FG can be a strategy used by nurses with their team, since this technique can facilitate discussions and problem solving to achieve their professional and organizational goals. Therefore, the following question is posed: "what are the aspects and mechanisms used by researchers for implementation of the FG technique?"

Regarding the relevance of this issue, this study aims to present the experience that researchers had with the FG technique used in qualitative research.

## DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE

### PERIOD FOR RAISING AWARENESS

In principle, in the notion of scientific research, the participants involved were all nurses from three hospitals, one private and two public hospitals. The private hospital has seven nurses and the public hospital has the total of 78 nurses, totaling 85 professionals.

The initial period of contact with the nursing coordination of each institution was carried out and, in accordance with the nurse who is the technical in charge (RT), suggestions were welcomed for scheduling the meetings of focus groups when it came to the day, the time and place. All nurses were invited to participate in the study. However, it is noteworthy that the return of these participants was partial, and at the end of the investigation, the survey was composed of 32 nurses.

After the agreement and suggestions of these institutions, focus groups according to the number of nurses participating

in each group were organized. In the initial process of raising awareness of participants, these were formally invited in person, by letter or by telephone and electronic means (*email*). Given this opportunity, the research objectives were presented, the importance of the adherence of participants to the realization of this research and the guarantee of anonymity, seeking to assuage concern due to any future exposure.

Thus, the focus groups were conducted in line with the periods of work of nurses, that is, morning, afternoon and evening shifts, and according to the availability of each professional to participate in the meetings. For the course of group discussions, two guiding questions were used to give direction to the activities of the groups in order that the objectives were achieved. Thus, three digital recorders were used in order to register the speeches of participants in full length and not run the risk of losses when using only a tape recorder.

Thus, six focus groups were conducted. One group was conducted in the private hospital, with four nurses; two groups in the public hospital, both with seven nurses and three groups in the public teaching hospital, two groups of five professionals and the other with four professionals. In all meetings, groups were conducted in the same way, but each group had individual characteristics and different numbers of participants. Periods of meetings ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and five minutes, taking into consideration that the groups were led by a moderator and observer.

In accordance with ethical standards, this study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL-MG), CAAE08899312.8.0000.5142, in which participant nurses signed the Informed Consent (IC) as recommended by the National Council of Health (NCH) 466/12.<sup>6</sup>

### DEVELOPMENT OF FOCUS GROUP: ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATION AND COMPOSITION

The choice of the place for FG sessions is critical for adherence of participants and the success of meetings. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an environment conducive to interactions which may isolate or reduce visual and auditory interference. Accordingly, a suitable place easily accessible to all participants involved in each institution was chosen, one that corresponded to these characteristics.

Therefore, the choice of the physical space is of paramount importance to provide a welcoming atmosphere for group sessions. In this perspective, in order to welcome participants before the activities carried out with focus groups, we used background music.

For application of the GF technique, participants may be arranged around a rectangular or oval table or chairs available in

circular form.<sup>7</sup> In our experience, the distribution of participants in the rooms was in a circle format in order to facilitate the interaction between them, since this distribution promoted good eye contact between professionals and the face to face interaction.

While conducting focus groups, other elements besides the participants must be included in the meeting; the literature reveals the need for the presence of a moderator who may be the researcher or other professional able to coordinate with confidence the group, through trust and empathy to achieve the research objectives without creating conflicts. The presence of an observer to record subjective information of participants in a field diary is also necessary.<sup>8</sup>

In this study, the moderator was represented by the professor who is the supervisor of the research. She coordinated groups with guiding questions and the observer was represented by the graduate nursing student, assisting at all times of the focus group but without interfering in the moderation of questions delivered by the participants.

In this experiment, for each FG, three recorders with capacity for up to 12 hours were used. Recorders were distributed at the table located in the center of the room in order to capture all the speeches of the participants without interference. Based on the characteristics of participants, only recorders were used, because we believe that video resources could interfere with the spontaneity of the participants or even expose them to constraints.

The sessions were organized with the following activities: preparation, presentation, development, closure and socialization through a fraternization. All activities had time setting. The preparation, lasting 15 minutes, consisted in the introduction of participants, brief introduction of the topic, presentation of goals and of the FG technique and ethical aspects. The development was directed by the guiding research questions with approximately 50 minutes. The literature reveals that it is ideal that encounters should last between a half hour and no more than three hours, and one or two sessions are enough to gather information for effective analysis.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the duration and the number of participants in each group meeting depends on the subject under discussion.

At the closure of groups of this experience, the coordinator, so-called moderator, held a synthesis of the group work and made clarifications about the issues addressed by the group from the ethical perspective. In the final stage, there was a time to socialize, including food and drinks.

### CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Group sessions do not require that an exact number of meetings be established. The determination if such sessions

should be resumed depends especially on participants have reached the subject under discussion.<sup>9</sup>

The moderator and the observer, in addition to receiving each participant in a friendly way, distributed the IC t for them to complete, aiming to consent to participate in the research in addition to making a badge to better identify the participants. Thus, once the work began, the moderator introduced himself to the members of the group, justifying the need to use recorders and explaining briefly the relevance and the research objectives. In the sequence, he moderated the discussion guided by a script that considered the objectives of the investigation. In this context, the observer had to fabricate badges, and to write down on field diaries the attitudes and behaviors expressed during discussions.

It is important to emphasize that, during the discussion, in addition to the script of topics related to research questions that the project in question aims to answer, other issues may arise provided they do not deviate from the goals as the focus is to develop a specific field where the moderator offers tips to introduce the subject. Thus, it is up to the moderator to perform various functions, such as lead the group in a harmonious and participatory manner, clarify or deepen specific topics, direct the group to the next topic when it runs out by the guiding question, encourage shy people and discourage those who talk too much and finalize the group reiterating the main points discussed.

During the groups, accounts of nurses about the facilitators and difficulties for implementation of systematization of nursing care in their work process were identified, research theme proposed in the study that generated this experience report.

The data obtained from the group discussions through the focus group technique are qualitative. This implies the need to analyze the data also qualitatively, that is, using a set of procedures to organize the data so that they reveal with the utmost objectivity and possible exemption of how the groups perceive and relate to the theme in question.

In this study, the coding of data via content analysis was performed.<sup>10</sup> The process of analysis often takes place concurrently with data collection, because it adopts a process in which the empirical categories and explanatory hypotheses are formed from the data; can be an usual procedure of qualitative research and reflect and analyze partial results, to better suit the procedures and data collection for subsequent meetings.

Thus, it is worth to mention that the groups, in general, had the effective participation of nurses, constituting cohesive and participatory groups, confident in the exposure of their experiences through proper direction of the moderator.

## DISCUSSION

One of the challenges faced by researchers when planning the development of the research was to adopt or not the FG technique, since even knowing that it would be a rich method of data collection and one with low financial costs, it would be an arduous task to keep the adherence of participants to group sessions.

Participants elected for this research were nurses in hospitals that have a rigorous labor demand and this is one of the limiting factors hindering the participation of all 85 nurses invited. This was one of the reasons why it was necessary to work with more than one focus group in the selected hospitals.

In this experience, a support technique, the interviews in this case, was not necessary because the objectives were achieved with the participants in the group sessions. Focus groups provided unique moments for professional growth for both, researchers and nurses, since the information collected actually showed qualitative reasoning in relation to the issue under discussion, which was the NCS, which is a subject that is still complex in the daily nursing work process.

Thus, the exploration of the subject held by the moderator was of great value, given its flexibility during the FG. This allowed participants to expose testimonies of the most varied experiences with unforeseen questions and encouragement transferred by the moderator.

It can be noticed that, in every hospital surveyed, when participants learned that all nurses were invited, including nurses who are the technicals in charge, there was a bit of embarrassment. This was because, at first, when approached, they thought that the purpose of the focus groups was to assess the knowledge of each professional regarding the NCS. This was also a possible limiting factor for non-adherence of all nurses, for fear of losing their jobs.

Thus, reflecting on the whole experience with FG, it should be emphasized that qualitative research using this technique offers an opportunity to skillfully explore studies on implantation of programs and health activities in which they want to value the grasp of the opinion and perception of participants who were directly involved with the subject to be searched.

However, the experience favored a critical reflection on the non-implementation of NCS by nurses. Many significant differences were found, not by the participants, but by the hospital that refuses to participate effectively in the implementation of the NCS.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The focus group, due to its roots in discourse and interaction, is part of the dialectic tradition, assuming the construction

of knowledge in inter spaces. Thus, it is assumed that the many voices involved in the focus group show similar and different aspects, constructions and deconstructions, inherent to the intersubjectivity that is under discussion. Selected goals must be carefully followed so that we must carefully follow the as well as analyze the profile of who will lead the group sessions.

We sought, by means of this report, focus on the technical construction process of focus groups and how it is imperative to follow all methodological rigor to the development of such. It is essential to deeply know the fundamentals and the technical development of this process, because its success or failure will occur to the extent that researchers are properly incorporated in the elected research.

However, it can be said that the focus group technique is not a simple task. It requires the appropriate attitudes from researchers for the deepening of the meanings and subjectivity of the subject addressed with participants on matters involving their work process.

While limited to technical description of focus groups, this work forwards to readers and researchers the deepening of the theoretical and methodological assumptions just mentioned in this study. Instead of exhausting the subject, this article stands as an invitation to those interested in developing research and work using this technique and contribute to a meaningful discussion that will put it on the agenda.

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