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Focus groups

A dialogical approach

What are focus groups?

- Focus groups are a research method based on open-ended group discussions that examine a particular set of socially relevant issues. In some respects, focus groups are expected to have characteristics that are similar to spontaneous and informal discussions taking place in cafés, in streets and in pubs.
- Focus groups may be regarded as socially situated interactions, this aspect being the defining feature of focus-group research. Interactions between the participants form both a means of generating data and a focus of analysis.
- The context in which focus groups take place is essential to their analysis. Meanings and contents of the participants' communicative interactions derive their significance from situations in which they take place and as from the related and socially relevant phenomena.

What are focus groups?

- These characteristics can generate rich verbal and interactional data and this is why we can say that they are potentially more 'social' than other methods in social sciences. They allow the researcher to examine dynamic interactions that take place during communication as well as the formation, maintenance and change of socially shared knowledge.
- Focus group can be characterised as being 'a thinking society in miniature'. This characteristic alludes to the supposition that a society as a whole is 'a thinking society' (Moscovici, 1984) and that, in observing society – or focus-group discussion - one can study the formation and transformation of knowledge as well as other social psychological processes.

What are focus groups?

- In addition to being 'a thinking society', a focus group is of course 'a talking society'; participants think together and talk together and are stimulated in their thinking when listening to other people's ideas. It is as if the 'strange perspectives' of others stimulate individuals to mobilise their own potentials to develop new insights and associations, and recall those which they have encountered on previous occasions.

Four analytical assumptions of dialogicality in focus groups

1. Focus-group discussions as group discussions

- One cannot separate the content of discourse from the interactions in which that content is being made manifest. That is, what people say is interdependent with how and why they say it. Participants in a focus group are engaged in diverse forms of the Ego-Alter interdependencies, e.g. an interlocutor versus other participants, the Ego versus inner dialogism or the Ego versus absent participants.

Four analytical assumptions of dialogicality in focus groups

2. Subjects' heterogeneity

- Focus group participants do not construct the 'same' content in the 'same' manner. They necessarily adopt different positions and change them. However, these positions may correspond neither to the researchers' predetermined framing nor they remain static or homogenous during the discussion.
- On the contrary, dynamic positioning is important. The participants' positions reveal different forms of socially shared knowledge. Thus it is important not only to identify positions from which participants speak, but 'to identify dialogical characteristics at the heart of the construction of social representations and being truthful to their density and dynamism'

The dialogical display of heterogeneity

- Positioning in dialogical dynamics
- The heterogeneity of the speaker
- locutor and enunciator
- The locutor is the one who utters the words, that is the one who says 'I'
- the enunciator corresponds to a point of view presented in the utterance, a point of view that may or may not be taken on board by the speaker.

Four analytical assumptions of dialogicality in focus groups

3. The circulation of ideas

- Circulation of contents is intertwined with the management of relationships, negotiating of identities and emotions. Participants do not just plainly declare their beliefs or opinions. When discussing sensitive topics they may try out their views in order to see responses of others and they test how far they can go in exposing their ideas. Moreover, contents are dynamically topicalised as the participants construct and deconstruct their opinions and quote absent 'third parties', either to support their positions or to present them as non-committal quotes of outside authorities

Dialogue and the circulation of ideas

- Metaphors, metonymies, tropes
- Topical analysis: From the flow of discourse to topics and themes
- Themes as recurrent topics
- Themes and themata
- Recurrent topics are often associated with analogies, distinctions, metaphors, metonymies, and other discursive devices.

Four analytical assumptions of dialogicality in focus groups

4. Knowledge taken-as-shared and themata

- Dialogue cannot be restricted to talk-in-interaction but that it is deeply rooted in history and culture. It has its past, present and future. Some relational categories can be implicit parts of dialogue (and to that extent of common sense) for many generations until, due to changes in societal circumstances, they become explicitly problematised and thematised. When this happens, contents of such relational categories are being transformed and generate new forms of socially shared knowledge.

The dialogical analysis of content in focus groups

- The dialogical analysis of content, because it is engendered from the theoretical position, enables the researcher to go beyond empirical demonstrations towards elaboration of concepts. However, the clarification of concepts is not the end in itself. Rather, it enables asking further meaningful questions expanding the field of inquiry. For example, can we identify conditions under which certain issues are being topicalised and become subject of linguistic modalisations? What can we find about the nature of phenomena that are taken as socially shared knowledge? In what manners are social representations thematised in different historical periods? And so on.

External framing

- Purposes and task
- The composition of the group – homogeneous, heterogeneous
- Setting and time
- Stimulus materials and cognitive artefacts – free talk, dilemmas

Internal framing

- What does induce participants into adopting particular genres, e.g narrative, small talk, decision-making talk? Are these types realised in different phases, or are they rather mixed into hybrid activities? Do different discourse types make different kinds of social representations relevant?
- The nature of topics: Are participants directly affected by the issues-in-focus or other topics brought up? Do interactionally delicate topics appear?
- Invocation of absent parties – do participants portray themselves as spokesmen of interests of others or they are opposed to them? Do they orientate to ‘remote audiences’ and other ‘third parties’, and do they invoke ‘virtual participants’?

Relations between discourses

- No neutral discourse
- the arguments and the contents of one speaker are related to those of the other
- every discourse presupposes a positioning of the speaker in relation to the content of talk

Other voices

- manifest themselves in different ways (as reported speech, as virtual discourse, quotations, and even stereotypical expressions) that correspond to various enunciators that take part in the debate
- the participants' voices are mixed with these virtual and actual resources
- Subjects also position themselves in relation to these.

Communication in focus groups and dialogicality

- the regard for the holistic aspect of symbolic communication
- language in interactions -socio-cultural dialogical aspects
- Hiding and revealing religious beliefs, ideologies, convictions and social representations.
- Communication in focus groups displays different kinds of temporary and more permanent 'identities' and perspectives; relations to third parties; invisible loyalties; homogeneous and heterogeneous thinking and talking – hiding or distorting thinking and talking - socially shared knowledge is characterised by tensions, contradictions, vagueness and ambiguities, by regularities and recurrent themes exhibited in focus-group data.
- Communication - moves in several directions. Taking perspectives and developing intersubjective understanding; setting own perspectives and striving social recognition. Confronting ideas, clash in open and hidden polemics; internal and external dialogues

Conclusion

- subjects position themselves in different ways in a particular situation; construct themselves as heterogenous and multi-voiced
- they enter into an interaction with the characters invoked in the dilemmas. They make explicit that they take a stance from different positions;
- in their argumentation they contrast their perspectives to the discourse and the positions that they attribute to their interlocutors;
- they call on different voices, whether real, fictional or virtual
- as locutors they do not present a monolithic image; internal dialogism constituted by restrictions, modulations and estrangements of various kinds.

Morality/immorality

- **By definition judgmental and evaluative in terms of Ego-Alter**
- **ancient societies: disease collectively represented as an activity of supernatural forces**
- **violation of social taboos resulted in illness and illness was a social marker of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour**
- **Christianity - links between sin and moral transgression, punishment and illness, apocalypse and plague**

Social representations of AIDS

- **morality/immorality always existed but problematised and thematised differently in specific societies and cultures**
- **1980s the epidemic of the new killed disease AIDS**
- **the media**
- **the institutions like Church**
- **governmental campaigns - “Don’t die of ignorance”**
- **scientific knowledge versus social representations**
- **can knowledge related to the self be neutral?**