

## **Focus Group as a Qualitative Technique in Cross-Cultural Research: Empowering Traditional Health Practitioners as Focus Group Moderators**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to see how focus group discussions could be facilitated to obtain authentic information from participants in a cross-cultural study. Traditional medicine and beliefs are still being practiced in sub-Saharan Africa. People consult with traditional health practitioners for various personal reasons including the treatment for HIV/ AIDS. Traditional health practice can be regarded as a cornerstone of African tradition; and represents a sensitive area for researchers who wish to explore traditional health practice and knowledge and its impact on health-seeking behaviour. Qualitative research methodology was employed at three sites in Gauteng and two sites in KwaZulu-Natal. Focus group discussions were conducted in the indigenous languages by traditional health practitioners who had been trained as focus group moderators. The results of the study indicated that emic knowledge, understanding and interpretations can be elicited with appropriate research methodology, technique and strategy especially when the custodians of traditional and cultural practices are included as part of the research team.

**Keywords:** Culture, Cross-Culture, Group Dynamics, Moderator.

### **Introduction**

This paper is a research methodology reflection on the study which culminated in a report entitled: “An exploratory study of how Traditional Health Practices in South Africa communicate the concepts of disease risk and prevention to their patients” (BRHC; Tabane; Mbele-Khama & Dlamini, 2012) for USAID. It reflects on how focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed to generate and collect data on the way in which focus group discussions, as one of the research techniques, was employed in this study as a tool to generate data in a cross-cultural study. The paper also deliberates on the importance of including the custodians of traditional health practices in the research team and how this inclusion was effected.

Focus group discussions as a data generation technique bring to the fore interesting yet complex considerations, since forming a focus group does not entail meeting with of a group of participants and asking them questions. A focus group “is an organized, facilitated discussion designed to enable researchers to

better understand the range of opinion among target groups of people about an issue, product, or service” (Hirsch, Lazarus, Wisler, Minde, Cerasani, 2013 p. 23). The focus group technique further allows participants the opportunity to extend their views about the phenomena of discussion while listening to other participants. This technique also allows participants the opportunity to change and/ or refine their views. Focus group discussions require much more than the numbers that constitutes a focus group. Its constitution should be based on the gist of the study; and the participants should be interested in the topic under discussion.

Focus group discussions are characterised by carefully planned discussions on defined areas or topics; and group dynamics are employed to explore and clarify or add to other participants’ views that might otherwise be less accessible or evident in the context of individual interviews (Morgan & Krueger, 1998 in Orvik, Larun, Berland, Ringsberg, 2013). A focus group should be constituted in such a manner that it meets one of the fundamental requirements, namely to generate authentic content knowledge. The participants should have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topics of the focus group. It is furthermore important that the context in which the FGD takes place is taken into consideration. According to Vicsek’s (2007, 2010), the dynamics of

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FGDs should always be considered because of their influence on the data that have to be analysed. The in-depth consideration of Webb and Kevern (2001) of the underlying assumptions of methodological approaches that may be used to underpin focus group research; and the methods to be used to analyse and report generated data are paramount.

The group dynamics and effects of the personal attributes in terms of personalities, level of education, socio-economic status and so forth might have a bearing on the data generated during the focus group. During a focus group discussion, data can be affected by the volume, range, depth and direction of the responses and ultimately the generated data and results of the research. It is therefore important that focus group participants are on an equal footing, and that the moderator is aware of the dynamics during the FGD. It is equally important for moderators to be aware of the power they have during FGDs. Vicsek (2010 p.123) highlights that moderators “come from different research traditions, paradigms, diverse disciplines and have different goals with their groups (academic, applied), and have varying levels of experience as [moderators]”. A moderator’s own personal attributes can influence the generation, collection and analysis of the data, and ultimately the results of the study.

As the researchers meticulously plan and arrange the constitution of FGDs, they should note their own characteristics or personal attributes might have an influence on the data generation and collection of data. According to Orvik, et al. (2013p.340) “many authors have argued that analysis of focus group results should be seen in its context, which includes aspects such as interactional factors and personal characteristics”, however they point out that most disciplines still omit this detail or fail to emphasise it (Vicsek, 2007, 2010 in Orvik, et. al. 2013). A moderator’s personal characteristics contribute to the group dynamics of the focus group composition and should always be considered during analysis.

Various research studies (Swisher, 1998; Smith, 1999; Lomawaima, 2000; Mihesuah, 2003; Mihesuah, & Wilson 2004; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Wilson, 2004, Wilson, 2008; Webster & John, 2010) have been conducted on the effect of research on indigenous participants and the results of such a research. In qualitative research, the choice of methodology has the potential to impact on data that are generated, collected

and analysed, and ultimately the research itself. The intricacies of research methodology become more intense when the research considers cross-cultural make up. The situation and context in which the research is conducted should always be kept in mind because distorted conclusions may be reached if the situational factors are excluded from the interpretation Vicsek (2007).

Culture as a research variable is a fluid concept that is defined differently. The research undertaking that requires culture to be a component of the research should consider the emic perspectives of the participants and ethics when gathering data. As an outsider, in cross-cultural studies, the researcher needs information from those who seek to preserve their knowledge. Therefore, the researcher should approach cross-cultural studies cautiously.

This research reports on the impact that sound research practice might have on a cross-cultural setting; in this case, indigenous people – the THPs as the custodians of the indigenous knowledge system and future research partners or collaborators. THPs represent the first line of healthcare for many people in sub-Saharan Africa. They are consulted for various reasons among which are HIV/AIDS-related diseases. Traditional health practising can be regarded as a cornerstone of African tradition; and represents a sensitive area for researchers who wish to explore the topic and its impact on health-seeking behaviour.

Research into the field of THP presents many challenges as THPs are cautious about divulging information about their practices; and they do not easily allow sojourners to enter this space and access the *emic* knowledge and beliefs in their practices. The relevance of conducting researches in indigenous fields, such as THP, has become more prominent especially in the sub-Saharan regions because of people who are practising their indigenous beliefs when dealing with day-to-day issues including physical and mental health. According to Kagitçibaşı and Berry (1989), one major trend in indigenised psychology in the Third World that is gaining momentum is the need for a problem-centred, rather than theory-driven approach. Thus, gaining an understanding of how THPs deal with health issues, including mental health, was one of the key research objectives of this study. It is essential that these practices are authentically understood to deal with and appropriately target health messages and interventions for behavioural change. Thus, researchers in cross-cultural studies need to develop

cultural competency about the phenomena being studied and, according to Pope-Davis, Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, Ligiéro, Brittan-Powell, Liu, Bashshur, Codrington, and Liang (2002) it is important because:

the underlying assumption has been that if a [researcher] is culturally competent, the [researcher] will be able to provide the most effective service through the establishment of rapport, appropriate interventions, and culturally appropriate treatment

(Pope-Davis et al., 2002p. 356).

This paper is not intended to show “how to” conduct a focus group, it rather offers reflections on some important pointers that can be considered when conducting a focus group in qualitative research in general and cross-cultural research in particular.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study borrows from Vicsek’s (2007) framework on situational factors to analyse the results of the focus group as done by the Orvik, et al. (2013).

**Table 1: Six key situational factors (Orvik, et al., 2013)**

<b>Situational Factor</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interactional factors	Psychological and social psychological mechanisms: social influence, conformity, minority influence, individual influence, conflict avoidance, interactions between the moderator (researcher) and the participants.
Personal characteristics of the participants	Demographic backgrounds of the participants; the group members’ knowledge of the theme that is discussed, their conduct, their feelings about participation in the discussion;and the roles they assume during FGDs.
The moderator	The moderator’s style; control in the group; professionalism; power and knowledge of the issues; moderator roles assumed in the session: the expert, the challenger, and the unfamiliar seeking for enlightenment.
The environment	Physical characteristics of the environment where FGDs are conducted; and the latent influence of the environment on the outcome, characteristics of the furniture in the room, and so forth; the peace and tranquillity of the environment; the location of the environment; and the degree of formality.
Time factors	The best time for conducting FGDs; the duration of the FGDs; the extent to which the participants are able to concentrate on specific questions, for example questions arising at the end of the day.
Content	Elements introduced in the guide or by the moderator in the session; information to participants, language, order and style of questions; the use of techniques; the extent to which a theme is personal; and the expectations of participants or society.

The framework is considered in terms of the complexities surrounding FGD data analysis; however, this paper focuses on the interactions between the THPs during data generation – the data to be thematically analysed. The role of the moderator was of particular relevance to this study. According situational analysis the following aspects play a role in data analysis: the moderator’s characteristics, group control, professionalism, power, and knowledge of the issue; the roles the moderator assumes in the session: the unfamiliar

seeking for enlightenment or the expert. However, in this study the focus was on finding a moderator who would be accepted by the participants, a moderator who would be regarded as an insider and not as an authority who exercises power over them.

**Research methodology employed in the study**

In this study qualitative research methodology was employed to gain critical insight into how THPs and their patients articulate, understand and act in relation to the

concepts of HIV/AIDS-related disease risk and prevention. The THPs do not readily grant access to people who are not health practitioners; and “outsiders” who collaborate with the indigenous people or custodians of THP knowledge are not easily trusted and when access is allowed, it has its own limitations. As noted by Webster and John (2010p. 175) “Even those Indigenous communities that allow entry into the field often approach these research “collaborations” with distrust or apprehension”. Thus, collaboration with the THPs as moderators was devised.

### **Research team**

The research team in this study comprised one black male – principal investigator; one white female – project leader/researcher; and one Indian female – project administrator/researcher (not one of them were THPs, thus in this study they are referred to as non-THPs), two senior THP members (one female and one male) who were researchers and regarded as THP experts on the project. The THP experts played a critical role and had to be individuals who are respected in the field of THP and they had to meet the criteria agreed on by the research team.

Firstly, the THP expert must fall in one or more recognised categories of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act 22 of 2007. The Act recognises four categories, diviners, herbalists, traditional birth attendants and traditional surgeons. Secondly, in terms of their THP experience, they had to be trainers of THPs with at least 10 years’ experience; and had to be successfully graduated new THP entrants. The THP experts also played a pivotal role in recruiting and identifying THP-moderators; assisted in conceptualising the qualitative research methodology; and in designing the research tool and focus group protocol used in the study. The THP experts were also responsible for the trustworthiness of the research tool during pilot testing. This was crucial since it guaranteed equivalence, bias and translations (Ægisdóttir et al., 2008) as cross-cultural methodological and design concerns. Most importantly, the THP experts supervised the THP-moderators and also coached and mentored the non-THP team members on what is regarded as acceptable in and around the traditional practices.

### **Selecting and training THPs as moderators**

Collaboration with THPs and the idea of using them as moderators was devised, because the THPs do not easily grant access to people who are not in practise; and

“outsiders” who collaborate with the indigenous people or custodians of THP knowledge are not easily trusted; and in instances where they are granted access, it has its own limitations. According to Webster and John (2010p. 175) “even those indigenous communities that allow entry into the field often approach these research ‘collaborations’ with distrust or apprehension”. Thus, it was important for this study that the participants trusted the research process and the researchers.

To be selected as moderators, the THPs had to have been through THP training for some years and probably would have started training and tutoring new THP entrants. They had to be over 18 years old and in possession of a matric certificate. These trainees had to be computer literate since they would be trained as transcribers of the audio recorded conversation and they also had to be willing to be trained as moderators and interviewers to conduct the focus group discussions. However, the focus of this paper is on the focus groups. Three THP-moderators were appointed to be part of the research team.

### **Sample of the research population**

One major criterion to be part of the study was that the participants should fall in the four THP categories as recognised in accordance with the Traditional Health Practitioners Act 22 of 2007. The participants in the study were THPs in four selected sites (municipalities) in the two identified provinces: Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. There are THP committees in the municipalities that are organised as forums; and each forum has a database of practising THPs in its sub-districts. In order to ensure that the research team does not influence the selection of participants, a letter of invitation was sent to the chairperson and secretary of each THP forum to select the ten THP participants who met the criteria of the study. At the end, there were 40 THP participants and the focus group was made up of 10-12 THP participants. This paper reflects only on the THP focus group discussions and not on the patients; although they followed a similar focus group make up.

### **Findings**

According to Webster and John (2010) when conducting cross-cultural studies it is important to consider the ethical concerns about power relationships that might serve to subordinate indigenous epistemology, methodology and representations of knowledge to the

established western academic traditions. Therefore, the involvement of indigenous people in the phenomenon or communities being studied is paramount since it will deal with some ethic concerns of research, for instance the voices of the participants that might be suppressed by the ideologies or aspirations of the researchers as a result of misunderstood concepts or disagreement about concepts raised during the discussion. Therefore, THP-moderators are employed in an attempt to create a culture-fair environment, since the THP-moderators and THP-participants will be discussing concepts that do not need to be interpreted; and there will also not be outsiders who, in an attempt to gain clarity, pose questions that, among others, could result in deviation from the topic or train of thought; and concepts that are watered down due to mistranslations.

Kagitçibaşı and Berry (1989p.500) stress that “cross-cultural findings cannot be adequately explained by process theory without taking into account culturally defined meanings”. THPs have their own beliefs about and meanings on how they deal with health issues; and their practices should be respected along with the concepts and ideologies thereof. Furthermore, if the situational factors are excluded from the interpretation, distorted conclusions might be reached (Vicsek (2007). This research moved from the rational that the involvement of THPs in the research process and not only in theory, firstly as research team members and secondly as moderators will, among others, attend to flaws such as subtle mistrust of the cross-cultural research findings where researchers who might not fully comprehend the “other” culture research cultural studies and make incorrect findings.

researchers [are] faced with confronting the history of exploitive research that contributed little to no benefit, or worse, research that caused damaging effects for Indigenous peoples and their communities can meet with resistance and even be barred from communities whose histories include such experiences (Webster & John 2010p. 175).

FGDs conducted with THPs by moderators who are THPs themselves proved to be a success according to

responses from participants during and after the research. Before the report was finalised, an analysis of the findings was taken to stake holders among which were THP organisations for member checking. The participants and various stakeholders expressed appreciation for the research process. The participants shared that they felt more relaxed and had a sense of being understood by the THP moderators; therefore, it was easy for them to engage in the generation of data. During member checking the participants insisted on using THP terms and they emphasised their concerns about a loss of meaning that might occur during translation or when coining terms from an indigenous language to English.

A concerted effort was made during this study to challenge the dominant research practice or western academic discourses (Gee, 2007) of outsiders or sojourners who are conducting research on indigenous people; this case, the THPs. In this study a decision was taken to train and actively involve THP custodians as moderators to deal with the authentic sharing of information; and facilitation of the flow of conversation, since the THPs could mirror one other during the focus group discussions. The mirroring of the participants will, according to Mutua and Swadener (2004), assist in examining the research methodological acts within the context of indigenous communities as a deliberate act of decolonising methodologies and ultimately the research (Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigle & Yazzie-Mintz, 2012). Thus, the aspects of cross-cultural research were employed to generate authentic data, for instance, the concepts and messages during the focus group discussion were not watered down by translations; and the participants did not feel a need to explain concepts that are part of their daily language to an “outsider” and it therefore contributed to low levels of frustration.

As insiders, the THPs used their indigenous knowledge of THP practices, the THP indigenous language, terms and understanding of concepts and train of thoughts, since they are at a cultural vantage point in terms of their belief system and the practice of THPs. Thus, data collected during the FGDs might be regarded as somewhat “cleaner” (more authentic) than it would have been had the data been generated or gathered by non-THP moderators, because they do not possess the cultural vantage in understanding the terms, concepts, belief system and so forth; and in some cases the meanings and interpretation could have been affected.

The focus group discussions were conducted in the

indigenous language of the THP participants which facilitated communication. This approach minimised misunderstandings, since no translations of complex THP concepts were required and, therefore, the methodological issues associated with equivalence and bias were dealt with by enhancing equivalence and minimising bias. The communication in an indigenous language contributed to the generation of richer data for collection and analysis.

One other responsibility of the THP moderators was also to transcribe the data of the FGDs. Firstly, they had to work on their transcripts individually; and as soon as they were finished with a number of transcripts they worked together to ensure that all the data were transcribed, and, most importantly, that the message was not lost especially in the translations before capturing the data on computer (qualitative computer software, NVivo9) and thematically analysing the data.

In cross-cultural research studies trust is of utmost importance and it undoubtedly influences the kind of data that is collected since the participants, for one or other reason, do not trust the researchers. In this study this issue was dealt with by bringing in someone who mirrored the culture and practices of the participants; and this ultimately assisted in the facilitation of communication and quality of data collected. The non-THPs stood back, which is unconventional in research. They had to let go of their position of power as experts; and allow the research process to unfold as planned with the THP experts and THP moderators in the forefront. While the non-THP presence might have had some impact on the research sites, a strategy for them not to be involved in the data generation empowered them to observe the processes and collect field notes which yielded additional information which is paramount to this process.

Traditional health practitioners were used as moderators to create an environment conducive to exchange information. The participants did not have to speak or search for terms outside their daily language to express their thoughts or opinions on the phenomena of the study. Furthermore, training and involvement of THPs as moderators assisted in enriching the data collection and analysis and in authenticating the findings of the study.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Researchers need to be constantly aware of their roles when conducting research; and they have to be sensitive

to the research fields, especially in qualitative and cross-cultural research studies. The researchers are challenged in cross-cultural researches to rather equip indigenous people with skills that will allow them to participate in research from a vantage point, as fellow researchers; and they are challenged to share the academic power that they possess as researchers. In this study it was shown that authentic data were generated as a result of training and actively involving THPs as moderators during FGDs. There are possibilities that had it not been for trained THP-moderators, on working on elements of data gathering, working from transcripts and so forth these data could have been watered down due to factors like misunderstandings, miscommunication, and information lost in translations. In addition, the fact that THPs acted as facilitators, moderators and interviewers during the data-generation and data-collection process made the participants feel more confident in exchanging information. Therefore, it is also very important to deal with issues of trust between the researchers and participants.

When conducting cross-cultural studies, researchers should take cognisance of the diversity that each research question, site and conclusions brings to the fore in research. The diversity in research may manifest itself through gender, race, cultural beliefs, disability, sexual orientation and preferences, personal attributes, manner of speaking and so forth. Researchers should be sensitive to the needs, feelings and concerns of the participants; and they should be respectful of their culture since this might influence the data generated and collected. The methodology employed in this study assisted in enriching the data and authenticating the findings of the study as a result of the appreciation of the ethical factors that the study brought. The research tools used in the study were designed with the assistance of THP experts and taken to the THP communities for pilot testing. This also assisted in ensuring that the approach and the language were relevant and acceptable to the THPs. Furthermore, after data analysis and during report writing data analysed was taken for member checking with the stakeholders who included various THP organisations.

When conducting cross-cultural research studies, researchers should put the interests of research first and focus on generating and collecting authentic data. The researchers should feel confident enough to let go of their position of power by being willing to empower others to the advantage of the research process and everybody

involved; and skills transfer is one such benefit. The involvement of the THPs as moderators in an academic setting empowered the THPs as researchers of note, not only to be used as translators or assistants to the “expert” non-THP researchers, but also to be actively participating in the generation of information about their practices. On the other hand, by empowering the THPs, there was also appreciation and respect for non-THP researchers, because they learned about the THP culture and also

learned not to impose their perceptions on the indigenous participants whom they perceive as powerless. More important, the approach mentioned above made it possible to gather and analyse the authentic data and THP roles in this study enriched analysed data.

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**مجموعات التركيز باعتبارها تقنية نوعية في البحوث المتعلقة الثقافات:  
تمكين الممارسين الاعتياديين كمراقبين في القطاع الصحي**

**رامودنغن تباني\***

**ملخص**

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التعرف على امكانية الافادة من مناقشات مجموعات التركيز للحصول على معلومات حقيقية من المشاركين في دراسات المتعلقة بالثقافات. ولا يزال الطب والمعتقدات التقليدية تمارس في أفريقيا حيث يتشاور الناس مع الممارسين الصحيين التقليديين لأسباب شخصية مختلفة بما في ذلك علاج فيروس نقص المناعة البشرية/ الإيدز. ويمكن اعتبار الممارسة الصحية التقليدية حجر الزاوية في التقاليد الأفريقية؛ ويمثل مجالا حساسا للباحثين الذين يرغبون في استكشاف الممارسة الصحية التقليدية والمعرفة وتأثيرها على السلوك في الأبحاث المتعلقة بالصحة. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن المعرفة والتفسيرات يمكن أن تستمد من منهجية البحث المناسبة والاستراتيجية المستخدمة خاصة عندما يتم تضمين القائمين على الممارسات التقليدية والثقافية كجزء من فريق البحث.

**الكلمات الدالة:** ثقافة، عبر الثقافة، مجموعات التركيز، أفريقيا.

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