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ABSTRACT TOURS

Extended abstract

In the last decade the focus group method has become known and increasingly used in the social sciences. Anthropologists as well as economists have started to apply the method as a supplementary, or the sole way of collecting data (Morgan 1997: vii, 1.5). In spite of being a method of expanding popularity it is not a method connected to population studies and demographic data. In this paper I explore possibilities and restraints with the focus group method. I present ways to analyse focus group data and I stress and show that focus group interviewing is a method with the potential to bring forth widened insights in reproductive behaviour.

A focus group interview is a group interview with the purpose of generating data from group interaction. The participants in the group are to discuss certain topics presented by the moderator (presumably but not necessarily the researcher). It is the interaction that is of interest. Morgan defines the focus group method “as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher’s interest that provides the focus, whereas the data itself comes from the group interaction” (1997: 6). The benefit of focus group interviews is that the participants may not always be aware of their opinions until they discuss the topic with others. The group interaction “may present the need to explain or defend one’s perspective to someone who thinks about the world differently. Using focus groups to create such interactions gives the researcher a set of observations that is difficult to obtain through other methods” (Morgan 1997: 46).

Participant observation, individual interviews or focus groups; whatever the method, the data produced by qualitative orientated researchers is commonly seen as a subjectively imbued product; the result of the researcher’s interpretations of the informants accounts and/or actions. These accounts and actions are in their turn products of the particular informant’s interpretation of the research situation and of his or her life and world in general at that moment. This paper illuminates partial and subjective aspects of research and the research product, and present epistemological issues as interesting and important to consider. By taking certain approaches when analysing data questions with regard to whether a person’s accounts relate to hers/his practices and mirrors ‘reality’ are not relevant to ask. Instead, things that are said in an interview can be regarded as evidence of discourses that in a certain context, the context of the interview and the societal context surrounding the interviewee and the interviewer, affect what is said and not said. These discourses, and how people relate to, use, negotiate, and construct certain discourses can be presented and analysed.

The two ways of analysing the focus group data that are applied in this study should be seen as complementary and as two levels of discourse analysis. I do not wish to identify with any specific school of discourse analysis. Instead, as suggested by Jaworski and Coupland, I conduct the analyses with an eclectic, multiperspectival approach, since “different

perspectives provide different forms of knowledge about a phenomenon so that, together, they produce a broader understanding” (1999: 4). I have labelled the two analyses ‘thematic’ and ‘subject positioning’ analysis. This is to separate the two but it may be misleading. I want to alert the reader to the fact that both the thematic analysis and the subject positioning approach are based on categorisations and a presentation of in the focus groups evident themes. What separates them is that the subject positioning analysis focuses more on how the discussion flows with regard to certain themes; on individual agency, narration and identity formation, while in the ‘thematic’ analysis the emphasis is on explaining certain themes in relation to social and cultural context. Both analyses include demonstrations of how the themes are discussed in several ways, with the participants using a variety of, often, contradictory discourses. These two ways of analysing the data can be seen as a strategy to include both structure and agency in the analysis, one of the big challenges when analysing a social phenomenon such as fertility. And by using different approaches when analysing focus groups, such as thematic analysis in addition to analyses based on theories about subject positioning, the desire to present collective understandings and experiences is not realised at the expense of individual perceptions and agency.

How is postponed parenthood explained in the focus group data? Are there any recurrent themes, common for all the groups? How can themes, or ‘models of explanation’, be understood with regard to social, economic, political, and cultural factors? How are identities preformed and constructed in the focus group context? Are certain identities, or subject positions ascribed more status than others, and in that case why? How is the focus group context influencing what people say and not say? These are questions that the analyses proposed in this paper can help the researcher to get a better understanding of.

The focus group method generates data containing a variety of, sometimes contradictory, answers. When analysing my focus group data on postponed parenthood in Sweden it is clear that there is a range of explanatory models that people use when discussing why people defer having children. However, there are general themes that are to be detected; themes that are brought up recurrently in different groups. These themes tell us something about the general; about mutual interpretations of the culture; about collective understandings influencing people’s behaviour and everyday actions. By applying a subject positioning approach the context of the group as well as the societal context and individual agency can be illuminated and discussed. The influence of certain discourses on certain individuals, the interpretation of discourses, and the process of constructing and defining identities are evident. The purpose of the paper is to discuss qualitative methods, focus group interviews, and thematic and subject positioning analyses, in the hope of presenting alternative ways for the demographic researcher to conduct and analyse data.

REFERENCES

- Jaworski, Adam and Coupland, Nikolas, 1999. ‘Introduction: Perspectives on Discourse Analysis’, in Jaworski, Adam and Coupland, Nikolas (eds.), *The Discourse Reader*. Routledge
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