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How can focus group discussions (FGDs) be used to their strengths in the Two-Thirds World? While handbooks for using focus groups in One-Third World contexts abound, researchers and students seeking guidance on this question have been limited to sub-chapters, articles and footnotes in publications on other topics (Lloyd-Evans 2006; Vissandjee 2002). 'Standard' focus group literature assumes a One-Third World setting, which limits its applicability to other contexts (Bloor et al. 2001). This dearth of relevant guidance on how to use the method in the Two-Thirds World has been accompanied by an unprecedented surge in its actual use there. Focus group discussions are now a staple - and sometimes the default - qualitative method in evaluations and assessments by aid agencies as well as in applied and pure research by

academics in the Two-Thirds World.

Monique Hennink's *International Focus Group Research* handbook is a welcome and long-awaited response to precisely this need. The author, Associate Professor of Public Health at Emory University, draws both on her own experiences in African and Asian countries and on interviews with other researchers who have conducted FGDs in Two-Thirds World contexts. The preface promises to combine this nimble 'feel for the field' with a commitment to data quality. One significant albeit obvious advantage over 'standard' FGD handbooks is the ease with which readers will be able to relate it to their own research situations in the Two-Thirds World. Illustrative examples and photographs from Africa and Asia help readers visualise the principles in the situations where they will actually be applying

them.

Another major strength of the book is its clarity: in structure, layout, and precision of language. It comprises twelve chapters, each for a separate stage in the research: planning, participant recruitment, data analysis, etc. One significant addition to the 'standard' FGD texts is a chapter devoted to 'training the research team'. This is pertinent because researchers are more likely to find themselves hiring and training assistants when conducting FGDs in the Two-Thirds World. The reasons for this are relatively mundane, but Hennink's no-nonsense commitment to lived fieldwork challenges is undeterred by their apparent banality. This unpretentious approach will be appreciated by graduate students who wonder whether their struggles are too quotidian to qualify for advice.

The handbook is an unparalleled resource on FGD methods. However, does it fully live up to its promise of addressing the main challenges to methodological rigour in FGD research in the Two-Thirds World? Readers who are familiar with the 'standard' focus group literature, and concerned with using the method to its strengths in the Two-Thirds World, will unfortunately recognise the bulk of the content as reviews of that same literature. The chapter on data analysis is specific neither to focus groups nor to Two-Thirds World research, and would not be out of place in a 'standard'

qualitative methods book. The chapter on discussion guide is similar, excepting a sub-section entitled 'Discussion guides for international focus group research', which deals exclusively with translation (64).

The challenges dealt with that are specific to the Two-Thirds World are logistical, for example translation and recruitment procedures, applying for research permits, and seating and recording arrangements. However this privileging of practicalities has three drawbacks. Firstly, it reinforces the very tendency she is countering, namely to focus on 'the management of fieldwork challenges' rather than methodological rigour. Secondly, it implies that apart from such practicalities, the challenges to methodological rigour in FGD research are identical in, say Senegal and Switzerland. Lastly, it fails to address challenges to methodological rigour specific to FGDs in the Two-Thirds World.

Two such challenges that are central to the literature on qualitative methods in the Two-Thirds World, and more difficult there than in One-Third World research, are power gradients and positionality (Apentiik et al. 2006; Madge 1997; Scheyvens et al. 2003). Power gradients refer to unequal power relations between researcher and researched. Positionality in this case refers to how the identity the researched assign to the researcher influences what they say to him or her (Bell et al. 1993; Henry 2003;

Rose 1997; Srivastava 2006). The steeper the power gradient, the greater an interest the researched have in adjusting their responses to who they perceive the researcher to be. Researchers' self-deployment may change who respondents perceive them to be, but this does not change the extent to which responses reflect respondents' perception of them, regardless of what that perception is. The absence of these two challenges is conspicuous because the 'standard' FGD literature claims the FGD method, when used to its strengths, can shift researcher-researched power relations and thus reduce the extent to which positionality determines what data can be generated (Kambrelis et al. 2005; Kitzinger 1999; Smithson 2000; Wilkinson 2006). Hennink's handbook gives no advice on this. The advice it offers on moderation seems to blithely gloss over this challenge:

The deference effect ... (where participants say what they think a moderator wants to hear rather than their own opinion about an issue)... can be avoided by clearly reinforcing to participants at the outset of the discussion that all views are valued and it is participants' own views that are being sought. (184)

Proponents of FGDs emphasise that most guidance on how to moderate a discussion relies on 'natu-

ral' conversation norms that are context-specific (Bloor et al. 2001). This makes it especially problematic that also the chapter on moderating discussions is largely a repetition of the 'standard' FGD literature. The few conversational norms that are mentioned are more about topics that may be tricky to elicit responses on in general, than about challenges specific to the FGD method. They are content-specific rather than method-specific, and say little about how the interactive processes on which the method hinges may play out differently in Two-Thirds World contexts, and how to handle this.

Given the challenges of steep power gradients, positionality and different conversational norms, this book does not adequately explain how FGDs can be used to their strengths in the Two-Thirds World. However this does not detract from the book's immense usefulness for one large group of readers. Researchers familiar with the practicalities of working in the Two-Thirds World, and with the 'standard' focus group literature, will find little new here. In particular, readers of the 'skeptical enthusiastic' literature that followed the method's surge in popularity, which hones in on what types of data FGDs can reliably generate, and how to conduct them in order to generate this type of data, will miss this level of epistemological awareness (Barbour et al. 2001; Bloor et al. 2001; Parker and Tritter 2006). Nevertheless, One-Third World re-

searchers embarking on their first FGD research project in the Two-Thirds World will find the handbook an invaluable companion. While the extent to which the textbook consists of reviews of other textbooks is problematic, this does also have its advantages when researchers pack their bags for countries where books may not be readily available. For this reason, despite its neglect of central methodological challenges to rigour in Two-Thirds World FGD research, if you have never worked outside the One-Third World, and do take only one methods book for your focus groups in Colombia, Cambodia or Cameroon, Hennink's handbook is a practical choice.

Endnotes

¹ The term 'Two-Thirds World' refers to the social majorities who "have no access to most of the goods and services defining the average 'standard of living' in the industrialised countries", as defined by Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash (1998, 16-17) and used by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2002). 'One-Third World' refers to the social minority in both the North and the South who do enjoy such a standard of living.

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