

Book Review: Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice

by Blog Admin

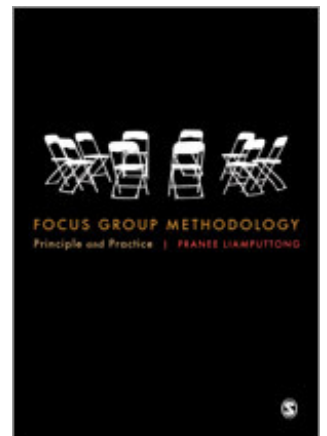
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Focus Group Methodology is an introductory text which aims to lead readers through the entire process of designing a focus group study, from conducting interviews to analysing data and presenting the findings. It also includes discussions on cross-cultural and virtual focus group. Illustrated with case studies and examples throughout, this is a perfect introduction to focus group methods for students and new researchers alike, finds **Keerty Nakray**.

Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice. Pranee Liamputtong. Sage.

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[Pranee Liamputtong](#)'s recent book *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practices* makes yet another important contribution to the scholarship of research methods. Prior to this book the author has written [Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide of Sensitive Research Methods](#), [Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research](#), and edited and co-edited books titled [Doing Cross-Cultural Research: Ethical and Methodological Perspectives](#) and [Knowing Differently: Arts-Based and Collaborative Research Methods](#). This lucidly written book will appeal to readers ranging from undergraduate students to seasoned academics in the field of social science research.



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This book is particularly enlightening as it shifts focus away from the common perception of focus group discussions as an “easy” option, commonly used when there is paucity of funds or time. Liamputtong succinctly explains that focus group discussions can be successfully applied in complex research projects involving sensitive topics with vulnerable groups, or in cross-cultural research with language barriers between the researcher and the research participants. These examples require focus group discussions to be carefully planned in terms bringing together participants who share similar social and cultural characteristics, and ethical difficulties also have to be anticipated and addressed beforehand. One of the common criticisms of the interview as a mode of social enquiry is that it epitomises the traditional power relationship between the researcher and the researched. On the contrary, in focus group discussions the presence of several research participants dissipates the power dynamics with the researcher. Furthermore, it facilitates the formation of a group consciousness and shifts the focus away from individuals to group experiences. Liamputtong illustrates this point with examples from the works of Paulo Friere (see [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)) and Jonathan Kozol (see [Illiterate America](#)). Friere established focus groups which he called “study circles”, as a way to work with vulnerable individuals in their marginalised positions within society. Similarly, Kozol formed “study circles” to elicit information and empower oppressed groups in his literacy programmes in New York City.

The two chapters that best represent the central premises of the book are Chapter 7, titled “Focus Group Methodology and Sensitive Topics and Vulnerable Groups”, and Chapter 8, “Focus Group Methodology in Cross Cultural Research”. In Chapter 7, the author elaborates that interviews have been a preferred means of data collection on sensitive topics due to ethical concerns related to breaches in confidentiality. Sometimes, vulnerable groups, including people suffering from HIV/AIDS, cancer, or mental illnesses, are censured by their colleagues or families. This censure is often a hidden reason for their heightened vulnerability to social exclusion and poverty. Poverty and social exclusion have traditionally been attributed to personal characteristics rather than societal failures. Therefore, policies and laws have largely adopted either a punitive or remedial approach. Most importantly, vulnerable individuals internalise this stigma and suffer from poor self-esteem. In this context, focus group discussions have the potential to move away from individual experiences and reaffirm group experiences, and clearly delineate social and economic processes that shape this social exclusion. Furthermore, it directs collective action towards political agencies that can bring about social change. On a practical level, focus group discussions are not fool proof and in spite of careful planning they can be amenable to intra-group power dynamics that might impede the participation of a few people within the group.

In the following chapter, Liamputtong addresses the difficulties of undertaking focus group discussions in cross-cultural contexts. Cross-cultural research is becoming increasingly important in a rapidly globalising world, as individual experiences of social and economic privation have their roots in structures of patriarchy, capitalism, race and caste. Debates within feminist research have emphasised that women across the world experience varying degrees of gender oppression, and it is within focus group discussions that women from lower classes, castes or marginalised racial and ethnic groups – who tend to have fewer opportunities for social interaction in the daily drudgery of work both at home and in the market – can more openly discuss their experiences. As Liamputtong elaborates, “focus groups may help not only to expose the layers of oppression that have suppressed their expressions, but also to facilitate the forms of resistance that they use for dealing with such oppressions in their everyday life”(p.128).

Cross-cultural research has the potential to transverse the political, social and economic boundaries that divide people and bring about a common understanding of social problems. This requires that practical issues such as the use of translators at various stages of data collection, transcribing, and analysis, are carefully planned, and that plausible lapses anticipated. Liamputtong cites Mathys, who elaborates “language is context and time bound, and created shared meaning, thus posing certain challenges because of its dependency on the way in which language is used within its context at a certain time”(cited from Liamputtong 2011: p. 224). Usually, triangulation of various research methods within projects is seen as a means to address the limitations of employing only one research method. Liamputtong also discusses the powerful effects of using non-traditional methods of research involving the use of photography or paintings to elicit participation of vulnerable groups such as children or disabled people.

In conclusion, Liamputtong has succinctly provided valuable insights into conducting focus group discussions, not merely as a means of quick data collection but rather as an instrument that can create knowledge for social transformation. In essence, focus group discussions bear consonance with the subtle aims of social science to generate collective consciousness and deepen the understanding of structural contexts of oppression and social change.

Keerty Nakray is currently an Assistant Professor and Assistant Director of the Centre for Women, Law and Social Change at the Jindal Global Law School, New Delhi, India. She completed her PhD in Sociology and Social Policy from Queen’s University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Prior to that she studied for a MPhil in Planning and Development at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, and a Masters in Social Work (Mumbai) and BA Sociology (Honours) from St Xavier’s College, Mumbai. She is currently researching on gender based violence, child abuse, health care insurance, public health policies and budgets. She has a keen interest in social science research methods and ethics. [Read more reviews by Keerty.](#)