



FOCUS GROUPS AMONG LATINO FARMWORKER POPULATIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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In 1990, Latinos comprised 9 percent of the United States population, an increase of 54 percent in the last decade alone (Bureau of the Census, 1993). As a whole, Latinos in the United States are less educated than non-Latinos, which may explain their heavy concentration in low-skill jobs such as agriculture (U.S. Congress, 1993). Low levels of education, mis-

trust, and language have been identified as barriers for Latino participation in research projects.

In cases where their participation is secured, traditional research methodologies must be adapted in order to obtain meaningful data. The need to adapt research methods is even more pronounced when the researcher utilizes qualitative methods, specifically focus groups. This article describes some suggestions for the implementation of focus groups among Latino farmworkers in the United States. Recommendations are

based on a study with Latino farmworkers conducted by the principal author (Perez and Fennelly, 1996).

IMPLEMENTATION OF FOCUS GROUPS WITH LATINO FARMWORKERS

Qualitative research methodology is characterized by the collection of descriptive data through collaborative inquiry, which enables researchers and respondents to interact during the data

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collection process (Brink, 1991). This type of inquiry is concerned with the process through which the knowledge is generated, rather than with the outcomes (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Merriam and Simpson, 1989). In addition, qualitative research is used to obtain insights into target audience perceptions and beliefs on health issues. One qualitative research strategy is the focus group.

Focus groups are characterized by the involvement of small groups of people to gather qualitative data during a focused discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Participants are generally volunteers who are recruited from the population with interest in the issue. As a rule, focus group participants do not know each other prior to their interaction during the interview (Krueger, 1989). As an important criteria, participants should not know the specific subject to be discussed and should be "newcomers" to focus group interviews. In addition, an experienced, capable moderator, one who builds rapport and trust, should be used.

In exploratory qualitative studies, there is usually no defined population, forcing the researchers to use their best judgement as to representability of the sample (Brink, 1991). This is particularly true when studying farmworker populations since traditional sampling methods are not always easily implemented. In many cases, Latino farmworkers are undocumented and are, for obvious reasons, reluctant to be interviewed. In other cases, the subjects' irregular work schedules necessitate adjustment of research timetables to coincide with farmworkers' free time, lest the interviews interfere with their labor and adversely affect their income.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this exploratory study was to validate several hypotheses concerning possible risk factors for HIV and AIDS among Latino farmworkers employed in the mushroom industry in the state of Pennsylvania. The topics discussed in the study included knowledge of HIV/AIDS, attitudes toward sexuality, and sexual practices present among this population (Perez and Fennelly, 1996). In this study, participants for the focus group interviews were selected using focused purposeful sampling. Initially, camps of migrant farmworkers to be visited were randomly selected from a list provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources; however, the list proved to be out-of-date and many of the camps had been closed. Therefore, the next step in identifying operating camps occurred with the assistance of a local well-known and respected minister and the extension agent, both of whom had worked in the area for a number of years. Their help in the identification of functioning mushroom camps and, in some cases, introduction of the research team was invaluable.

Following introduction, farmworkers were invited to participate in the focus group discussions. Due to the validation provided by the individuals described above, all farmworkers approached for participation agreed to answer questions during the focus group interviews. In some cases, however, men left the groups when the questions became "too personal," such as questions related to condom use and same gender sex.

In this study, two group moderators were used. The primary investigator conducted the focus group and directed the conversation around the topic of interest, whereas the second moderator noted important points and provided follow-up probes during the conversation. The second moderator also took detailed notes, including selected responses, participant reactions to questions, as well as relevant

body language. Although some men in our study were reluctant to have two researchers present, they soon forgot the second investigator and concentrated on talking with the primary investigator. Responses were audio taped, with the participants' permission, by two strategically located tape recorders. Data analysis included transcription of the audiotaped conversations, content analysis of the field notes, and individual analysis of the data by each investigator in search of emerging themes. The data were further analyzed by use of the ethnograph computer program.

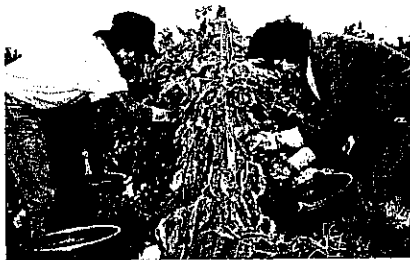
RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for focus group discussion with Latinos are examined based on the following major categories: 1) group membership — this includes issues such as size of the group, the number of sessions held, and the level of familiarity of the group members; 2) facilitation — this includes the role of the facilitators and their knowledge about the subject matter, as well as ability to interact with the group; 3) the focus group process — this addresses the location, communication, recording (video/audio), ability of group members, and data analysis.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP

First, participants need to know a little bit about each other. An around-the-room introduction before the beginning of the session greatly assists with group dynamics by allowing the participants to get to know one another. Yet, in order to maintain confidentiality, it is suggested that, when possible, only first names be used by the participants. In this case most of the participants knew each other, but the informal introduction allowed them to feel relaxed and willing to participate.

Secondly, the research literature suggests that an acceptable number of focus group participants is from four to twelve. Our experience, however, indicates that when conducting focus groups among Latinos the appropriate



number is between four and eight. Larger groups enable participants to be "social loafers" and significantly increase the length of each session. Also, groups larger than eight were more likely not to discuss sensitive or personal issues. It is hypothesized that this reluctance was due, in part, to the discomfort and embarrassment caused by the size of the group. In our experience, the men interviewed lived together in outlying areas of the city. Therefore, their social support networks were linked to the focus group members. The more participants per session, the less likely the men were to disclose personal information.

Third, our experience indicated that a one-time approach to focus groups is the most appropriate when collecting data from Latinos. Additional sessions may not be appropriate due to a number of factors, including overburdening the population with too many meetings and historical learning triggered by the focus group discussions. For example, during the farmworker study it was necessary for participants to return to the group for clarification, yet some group members refused, stating they had already answered the questions and had nothing more to contribute.

Although one-to-two hour sessions are generally most recommended, the longer sessions may not yield valuable information as the participants may tire or be thinking about previous commitments. In our experience, focus group participants started to lose interest after approximately 1.5 hours. Interest loss was indicated through increased shifting in their seats, not answering questions, and

looking at the floor instead of the investigators when answering. Thus, focus groups with this population should be conducted as a one-time approach, not to exceed one and a half hours.

CULTURAL AND NATIONALITY ISSUES

In order to work with Latino populations in general it is necessary to understand about their country of origin and their background. Although all of these farmworkers are characterized as "Latinos," there are significant cultural and nationality differences among them. For example, Cubans are different from Mexicans, who are different from Central and/or South Americans. In order to obtain reliable information during focus groups it would be important to consider their background. This would enable the facilitator to gear the questions, or modify them if necessary, in a way that would elicit a more accurate response. Terminology used to describe some sexual behaviors may differ depending on the background of the participants. For example, while some groups refer to prostitutes as *camperas* others refer to them as *putas*. Understanding these differences would facilitate the group discussion and reduce the need to return to the group for clarification. Furthermore, some Latinos prefer to discuss sensitive topics such as sexuality in their native language; thus if Spanish is their primary language, as is the case with many farmworkers, then the focus groups need to be conducted completely in Spanish.

Finally, the investigator must explore and understand the migration and immigration status of the farmworkers. Some, especially Mexicans, migrate back to their country following the harvest season in the United States. Other workers will travel around the United States, depending on where the crops are, and work in different areas throughout the year. This is important to consider if there is a need to return to the group for clarification.

THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator must be similar to the population of interest or at least be knowledgeable about the population. In our study, focus group facilitators were all Latino immigrant males, had Spanish as their first language, but differed in nationalities from that of the group participants. In cases where the investigators are foreign to a community, they would be well advised to be introduced by persons familiar within the community, although this person need not be the same as the moderator. In our experience, introductions by the community leaders proved invaluable in gaining access to, the trust of, and the cooperation of the subjects.

In addition to ethnic/racial similarity to the focus group participants, the facilitator must be able to effectively communicate fluently in both Spanish and English, which enables the participants to express their feelings in the language in which they feel most comfortable. In our study, group participants could select either language for group discussions; however, they spoke in Spanish when discussing sensitive topics. Spanish language proficiency, however, is not enough. The facilitator must be able to understand the language nuances of the Latino group being interviewed. Unless the facilitator understands language use by the group, important meaning will be lost.

Although there is some controversy about the need for same-gender focus groups in the general literature, among Latino farmworkers it is recommended that male and female groups be separate and that the facilitator be of the same gender as that of the group being interviewed. Our experience indicates that Latino men are likely to discuss sensitive issues with other men, and that women are more likely to be more open with female interviewers. Results from the mentioned study showed that while farmworkers were willing to discuss sexual issues during the focus groups, they reported a reluctance to discuss sex-related topics



Farmworker: Florida

Photography: Michael L. Kimball

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with their female sexual partner (Perez and Fennelly, 1996). Similarly, Luquis, Conception, and Bressler (1997) found that when conducting focus groups with Latinas, in general they seem to be more willing to disclose personal information to another female than to a Latino male.

FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

In order to insure a successful focus group, the investigators must be willing to travel to the location where the participants live or work. Our findings indicate that participants will more openly discuss issues if they feel comfortable and safe in their surroundings; therefore, an unfamiliar and cold university research laboratory or hotel will not be as effective.

In addition, in order to maximize participation in the groups, the researchers have to first identify each group's leader. In our study, this identification was necessary to facilitate communication between the farmworkers and the research team, as illustrated by the following experience. In order to maximize participation in the groups, the researchers had to first identify each group's leader. At one of the group meetings, the leader all but prevented the farmworkers from answering questions, until he was convinced that the researchers did not represent a government agency. Once his cooperation had been secured, he facilitated communication by directing people to share their experiences. Although leader input was sought, the researchers were careful to avoid social loafing, which refers to individuals depending on others to answer questions or do things for them (Latane, Williams and Harkings, 1979).

Moreover, focus groups with Latino populations are best conducted in a discussion format. Direct questions to individual group members (whether real or perceived) are not likely to elicit a great deal of responses. It is best to pose questions in a general format, *i.e.*, ask about "others" instead of individual behaviors, and

then allow the conversation to progress. The principal investigator's task then becomes one in which she or he insures the conversation does not stray into (un)related areas.

Audio and/or video recording is often helpful for focus group data analysis. The use of audiotape, or videotape when possible, will help the investigators in the data gathering process. Yet, audio or video taping may be intimidating to the group, so it is important to explain its use and ask permission from the participants before proceeding. For example, out of the twelve focus interviews we conducted, in two groups the members raised a level of concern about the audio recorders placed strategically around the room. The investigators explained the significance of having the recording, following the explanation they requested permission to record the first ten minutes of the conversation. The investigators also promised to turn off the recorders at the end of the first ten minutes if the participants still felt threatened by them. In both instances, the focus group participants ignored the recorders and did not request that they be turned off.

In addition, it is imperative that during the data analysis process audiotapes are transcribed by an individual not involved in the project. This will prevent misinterpretation of the data, and provides additional input to the investigators. Nonetheless, it is the investigators' responsibility to rectify any discrepancies in the transcripts by relistening to the audio while reading the typed written comments.

Finally, it is imperative that the researchers know their role during the focus group interview. On two occasions one of the facilitators volunteered information prior to the discussion. Although we do not believe data collection was compromised as a result of his comments, it would have been better to allow the participants to discuss those topics whenever they were ready.



CONCLUSIONS

Focus groups are a valuable tool in data collection (Basch, 1987). Our experience suggests that focus groups with Latino farmworkers should be conducted by members with similar backgrounds and of the same gender as the group participants. Whenever possible the investigators should involve community leaders in order to increase acceptance and trust by the community; this recommendation is very important for Latino populations when discussing personal issues. Finally, focus groups among Latino farmworkers are most successful when held within the local community. ■

Note:

References available upon request.