

The Dynamic Process of Focus Groups With Migrant Farmworkers: The Oregon Experience

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Focus groups with culturally diverse populations, and Latino farmworkers in particular, have been used as an effective research method. However, the specifics of planning and implementing focus groups with diverse populations have not been elaborated in the literature. Focus groups were used as part of The Reducing Pesticide Exposure in Minority Families Project to successfully elicit migrant farmworkers' views on pesticide exposure and preferences for educational method. Although attention was paid to cultural and lifestyle considerations in the planning and implementation of our focus groups, recruitment, environmental context, convener, focus group questions, and within-population differences were identified as areas that required ongoing assessment and operational change. Vigilance to the dynamics of the process resulted in more effective focus groups.

KEY WORDS: migrant farmworkers; focus groups; research methodology.

INTRODUCTION

As a qualitative research method, focus groups are becoming more widely used with low-income culturally diverse groups to obtain valid information on a variety of subjects (1–8). However, information in the research literature regarding the methodological process is scarce. Krueger (9) and Stewart and Shamdasani (10) provide sound evidence-based guiding principles that assist the researcher with the overall design and conduct of focus groups. However, with respect to Latino seasonal and migrant farmworkers, culture and lifestyle play an integral role in the design and conduct of focus groups; and yet, minimal information regarding these considerations is avail-

able. Focus groups with Latino farmworkers that produced useful information have been documented in the literature (11–13); however, the specifics of the methodological process were not elaborated. This paper will discuss some of the challenges presented during the course of the study entitled “Reducing Pesticide Exposure in Minority Families Project” regarding the planning and conduct of focus groups with Mexican migrant and seasonal farmworkers (MSFW) in Oregon. Highlighted will be the process in which emerging methodological challenges were identified and adaptations in the design were made to respond to them.

BACKGROUND

The Reducing Pesticide Exposure in Minority Families Project, funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, is a community-based participatory research program focusing on pesticide exposures in Latino migrant farmworkers. The exposure of farmworkers and their children to pesticides has been an area of increasing public health concern. However, the migrant farmworker community presents distinct challenges by its very

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nature and requires new approaches for community participation in research. In this research program, university researchers from Oregon Health Sciences University have partnered with the Oregon Child Development Coalition, a private, not-for-profit corporation formed to address the needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. This agency is the grantee for the Migrant Head Start (MHS) Program in Oregon and provides services to over 2000 migrant children and their families each year throughout the state of Oregon. The aim of the research program was to use a community participatory model to characterize the degree of exposure to pesticides and potential health effects in migrant farmworkers and their children. The project has focused on four major areas of scientific inquiry: assessment of housing conditions and pesticide residues in household dust; assessment of biologic markers of pesticide exposure in adults and children; development of methods to assess neurobehavioral function in migrant farmworker children; and development of culturally appropriate educational interventions with migrant families. A major goal of the project was the development of an effective and culturally appropriate pesticide exposure educational intervention for migrant farmworker families. We used focus group methodology to elicit the community's points of view on pesticide exposure, the effectiveness of educational messages, and their preferences regarding types of interventions. The results of the focus groups were used in the development of a culturally appropriate pesticide exposure video that addresses the major ways that the children of farmworkers are exposed to pesticides and the prevention methods that can decrease these exposures. This paper describes our process of conducting focus groups with the farmworker parents of children enrolled in MHS centers and the cultural factors that influenced the design that we used in conducting these field investigations.

Desiring the perspective of the migrant farmworker, focus groups were determined to be the most feasible and most productive means to obtain information from the parents regarding pesticide beliefs and practices and pesticide education. These migrant farmworker parents would only be available for short periods of time during the crop season. Their workdays are long and usually six days per week. Therefore, focus groups that could gather sufficient numbers of parents together for as short a period of time as possible were deemed our best choice.

The focus groups were conducted during the 1997 and 1998 harvesting seasons in five communities

throughout the state of Oregon. Fifty-nine parents aged 21–30 years of age participated in the focus groups. Twenty-five females and 34 males participated. All were Mexican born and 50% had five or less years of education. Length of time for each focus group averaged 70 min.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The open response of the focus group format provides the researcher with opportunities to obtain large and rich amounts of data in the participants' own words (10). In order to obtain maximum participation and quality data, cultural factors and lifestyle were key considerations in the beginning design of the process and continued to be throughout the sessions. Our research project identified environment, recruitment, focus group questions, convener, and within-population differences as major sources for ongoing assessment and operational change.

Environment

Planning for the environment in which the focus group will take place is an important consideration (9). The environment must be permissive enough that different perceptions and points of view can be shared (9). Krueger also points out the need for the focus group environment to be neutral, so that the types of responses by the participants are not influenced by location where the group is taking place. We found that other environmental factors were also culturally important, including the time of the interviews, transportation to the site, food, childcare, visitors during the sessions, and overtime pay for community partners.

The work schedules of migrant farmworkers are very demanding and efforts were needed to minimize the burden of attending a group meeting after a long day of working in the fields. Before scheduling the full series of focus groups, parents were asked what times were most desirable for them. Educational meetings for the parents typically were held by the MHS program at the centers once per month during the growing season (months of operation). In order to take advantage of the parents being present as a group, the first focus group was conducted on a week night following a short educational meeting. When asked, the parents agreed that the MHS center was the best location; however, they preferred a weekend afternoon as the best time. Conducting the focus groups

in conjunction with other scheduled parent meetings at the MHS centers was the most convenient for the research team, but was not the most desirable for the parents. While conducting focus groups on the weekend posed challenges for recruitment and payment of MHS staff for child care, transportation, and food preparation, it was viewed as necessary to obtain the best participation rates by a cross-section of parents.

Childcare for the migrant farmworkers during a focus group was an absolute necessity. The parents had no other option for childcare but to bring their children with them. As a result, the initial focus group was constantly disrupted by talking, crying children, and parents responding to their child rather than the discussion. Childcare with acceptable caretakers, i.e., MHS teachers and assistants, and a separate room location were provided subsequently, which greatly improved parents' participation and the recording quality of the sessions.

In the initial planning, the project staff assumed that the farmworkers would not have ready access to transportation to the site for the focus groups. However, transportation turned out to be very difficult and costly to arrange on a weekend and was eliminated when MHS staff assured the research project team that enough parents had access to transportation and could get themselves to the center. Although all but one of the focus groups had acceptable turnout, it is most likely that the opinions of parents who did not have cars and would have had to pay another farmworker for transportation to the center were not represented in the focus groups. Farmworkers without transportation tend to be the newer immigrants from Mexico, very migrant rather than seasonal, and perhaps more traditional Mexican in beliefs and practices. Since the purpose of the focus groups was to obtain cultural feedback to assist in the design of an educational tool to be used by all members of a population, these parents without transportation should have had the opportunity to attend if desired. It is possible that several of the new immigrants without transportation may have spoken indigenous languages and would have been uncomfortable with the spoken Spanish. Group facilitators fluent in indigenous languages being spoken by the group would have been necessary. These cultural differences have been found to be associated with knowledge level of pesticides and work practices (14). Not providing transportation for these parents to the focus group sessions was identified as a weakness of our project.

In the other components of our research program, we have noted the social value of providing

food for the participants. Mexican food or pizza (for convenience) was served either before or after the focus group. Needless to say, Mexican food appeared to be the more favored. Initially, a MHS cook prepared Mexican food at the center. This was costly and the food's readiness was occasionally not in sync with the focus group schedule. As it turned out, Mexican food ordered from a restaurant was less costly and pickup could be timed to the schedule. The times that the project staff ate with the participants resulted in conversations about the parents' personal experiences with work and pesticides. Additional insights were obtained and the time was socially rewarding.

It was not always possible for the research team to control who was present during the focus group. For the initial focus group that followed a parent educational meeting, several MHS center staff were interested in the proceedings and remained during the session. From the perspective of the research project staff, it was apparent that too many individuals were present. We asked ourselves if it could be intimidating to the parents for MHS staff to be present. To whom were the parents responding? In future sessions, we explained our concerns about visitors' presence and asked that MHS staff not be present as observers.

Recruitment

For any focus group session, recruitment for participants involves getting the word out to the right potential participants and striving to reach a sufficient number of participants. For our research project, the methods used for recruitment, the intensity of recruitment efforts, the responsible party for recruitment were noteworthy considerations and sometimes, challenges.

As stated above, a broad sampling of MHS parents was desirable for participation in the focus groups and not just the parents who were most actively involved in MHS activities. However, the methods of contacting potential participants were limited. Most of the migrant farmworkers do not have telephones. Fliers sent home with children from MHS may not be read. The literacy levels of the parents vary considerably. It would be impossible to know ahead of time just how many parents who were told about the focus groups would attend. With these factors in mind and not knowing what group size would be effective since not all parents spoke out at the education meetings, all parents of MHS children were invited.

A total of 59 parents participated in five focus groups at four different MHS centers. Attendance

varied from 4 to 17 parents. The largest turnout occurred at the focus group that followed the parent education meeting, which was not surprising since those meetings are usually well attended. The combined activities of parent education and focus group resulted in a long and tiring night for the parents. Considering attendance, as it turned out, the quantity and quality of participation by the parents during the session determined an effective focus group rather than the number of participants.

As the community partner for the research project, the MHS center staff undertook the recruitment of parents. Invitations were sent home to parents with their children, which was a frequent mode of communication. Outreach staff promoted the event whenever possible while visiting families in the camps for other business; however, the opportunities for follow-up with parents about the focus group were determined by MHS staff workload. Attendance appeared to be higher at those centers that staff reported that they followed up on the initial invitation.

The wording of invitations differed slightly among centers. Outreach staff were allowed to design or change the wording of the invitations. However, we found that it was important to review the invitations before they were sent for accuracy of the message. In two cases, parents had been given the impression that they were coming to a pesticide education program. It is possible that the outreach staff may not have fully understood the purpose of the focus group.

Focus Group Questions

Questions are the heart of the focus group interview (9). The key considerations regarding the focus group questions were breadth versus depth of information being sought, order of questions, wording of questions, and when to change questions.

The goal of the focus groups was to elicit migrant farmworkers beliefs and practices regarding pesticides and exposure prevention. We also wanted to know about past pesticide education and desired future education. Seen as a rare opportunity to obtain information from this population, research project staff initially generated a lengthy list of questions. Following discussion regarding the lack of experience of migrant farmworkers in expressing their opinions and discussing in groups, the number of questions was reduced to what was determined to be a more realistic number. Our guiding principle was to have essential

key questions to explore in as much detail as possible before the participants became fatigued or lost interest. Because the participants were unfamiliar with group discussion, we allowed time to clarify or re-ask questions in different ways.

Focus group interview schedules should make use of several different types of questions, each having a distinct purpose. The ordering of questions is important also for eliciting group interest and participation. Introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and allow participants an opportunity to reflect on past experiences and their connection with the overall topic (9). In our first group, we erroneously chose an open-ended statement that we believed would provide insights into their work practices, i.e., tell us about a typical day at work for you. Answers were so brief that the time spent was not meaningful. However, we changed that question to another open-ended one, i.e., "tell me what pesticides mean to you," and it seemed to start individuals talking. We also discovered that more concrete statements followed by one or more straightforward questions worked well. For example, the statement "it is said that pesticides cause health problems" followed by ascertaining that participants agreed, followed by questions such as "what type of illnesses? What type of symptoms? How long do these illnesses last?" Another example was the statement, "others have told us about pesticides affecting only weak persons. What do you think?" Seeing that both of these types of questions could work, we interspersed straightforward, simple questions among more open-ended questions such as "tell me what being exposed to pesticides means to you."

Caution is warranted with changing questions. Maintaining fairly consistent questions between groups yielded more information about a certain area of inquiry. This does not mean that dropping dead questions or adding new questions derived from past groups is not a sound process. In determining the survival of any question, we were tempted to keep only those questions that evoked the enthusiasm of the participants (multiple simultaneous responses, laughter, comments). However, certain less exciting questions also provided helpful information. For example, "tell me how you know about pesticides" lead to information about the inappropriateness of methods and the inadequacy of information received from employers. "What can a person do to protect him or herself from pesticides" often lead to some time of silence, some moans, and then a listing of behaviors.

We also discovered that certain questions were never really answered but yielded worthwhile information. For example, participants had used the terms "in contact with pesticides" and "exposed to pesticides." We attempted to clarify if there was a difference but never really got a firm yes or no. However, participants provided more insights into the negative effects on a person from pesticides as they responded to our question about the difference between phrases.

The subject of questions could not be directed to "you." For example, "tell me what you do to protect yourself from pesticides." Participants appeared to take these personally and would not answer or they would state what was obvious. More useful information was gotten when the question was directed to "a person" or to "one," such as "what can a person do to protect him or herself from pesticides?"

Although our groups contained a few outspoken women, more women deferred to their husbands to speak. Several pairs chose not to speak at all even when approached through eye contact or asked for their opinion. However, both parents had been invited and it was important to respect the family's presence.

Focus groups began with some casual conversation about work, family, food, or weather before the actual questioning began. This was a cultural practice that seemed to help participants feel at ease. All sessions were recorded without any disapproval or talking to the microphone from the participants.

Moderator

As with all well-conducted focus groups, we noted the importance of an appropriately trained moderator with skills and abilities in eliciting group communication. The presence of an assistant moderator to observe and record group dynamics was also important. Participants must feel comfortable with the moderator and see the moderator as an appropriate person to ask the questions (9). Giving consideration to gender, race, age, and socioeconomic factors, we also believed that the person needed to be male and Latino since we were not certain if the male participants would respond as much to a female as to a male. We also wanted the participants to be able to identify with the moderator. These criteria were assumptions of preference by the community partners and by research project staff with considerable experience working with this population. We chose the

MHS research project coordinator who was bilingual and Mexican.

Perhaps more important than the moderator himself were the training of the moderator, the moderator's ability to connect with and draw out the participants, the wrap up with the audience at the end (summarizing information), and assessing one's performance and revising for the next session.

The training of the moderator involved three aspects. First, the moderator had been involved in designing the focus group questions so he had a good familiarity with the questions. Second, the moderator attended a half-day training on focus group interviewing done by experienced research staff. And third, a research staff member (the note taker) viewed the moderator's performance each time and made recommendations for the next session. Examples of recommendations were to not reword a question and include a suggested response, or not to shake his head in agreement, or say "good" following a response. Recommendations such as these were directed toward eliminating bias.

The role of an assistant moderator behind the scene was to take notes regarding moderator and participants' behavior, listen for dropped points to be revisited, and to clarify and expand any information provided. This person proved to be valuable in pulling together the loose pieces of information obtained during the session and asking any questions that may have been lost.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Focus groups can be an integral component of community-based research programs and when used with a target population, in our case—migrant farmworkers, can be an efficient and practical method for obtaining information for planning public health interventions. Cultural background and lifestyle of the participants should be recognized in the planning and implementation of focus groups. Although the research staff either were bicultural or had extensive work experience with the target population, we had not known a priori how all the cultural and lifestyle factors would play out in the focus groups. Much was learned throughout the process. By being vigilant to the dynamics of the process, changes were made that we believe resulted in more effective focus groups.

A significant lesson learned was to be flexible so that crying children, a broken recorder, a sick

moderator, no participants present at the scheduled time, and other surprises did not wreck havoc. We had to accept that all aspects could not be controlled especially when we were working with mobile, hard-working, and fatigued individuals and a partner agency that was extremely busy during harvesting season. That is not to say that trouble areas should not be anticipated and alternatives ready for implementation. With clear and ongoing communication regarding all aspects of the focus groups and with all agency staff a smoother process overall can be achieved.

In addition to the primary goal of obtaining information regarding pesticides in order to develop an educational tool, the focus groups produced several secondary outcomes. That is, the parents identified the Migrant Head Start center as a good source for pesticide education following the focus group. They viewed the focus groups as a beneficial educational time. They also appreciated being asked to participate—"our answers are not so good because no one had asked our opinions before." And lastly, the focus groups proved to be an effective method of determining educational methods that would be culturally appropriate and meet specific needs in the target population.

The design of our project's focus groups was an emerging, dynamic process that yielded high quality data. The lessons learned from our experience should be relevant for other research projects using focus groups with Mexican agricultural farmworkers.

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