

Reflections On 'Insider Focus Groups'

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Abstract

This reflective paper draws from the experiences of a female qualitative researcher exploring the opportunities and challenges of following an insider's perspective when conducting doctoral research. The study uses data produced through online focus group discussions during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the attitudes of young people towards Brexit and Europe. The combination of shared characteristics (age, status, nationality) with researcher/participant power dynamics proved to deconstruct traditional hierarchies in the focus groups, allowing participants to establish their expertise on the topic and bring their own agenda to the discussion, while limiting the researcher's control and increasing unpredictability during insider focus groups. This work adds to the debate about the impact of the insider's viewpoint, and the ways in which we can develop resilience to overcome the challenges associated with this mode of research conduction, emphasising on the researcher's flexibility and reflexivity.

Introduction

The relationship between researcher(s) and research participant(s) has been a recurrent theme in methodological literature (Råheim et al., 2016) since their respective positionalities influence the way they engage with each other in qualitative research (Ayrton, 2019). *Insider focus groups* are hugely shaped by the participants' 'self' and social interaction, creating rich data, but also limiting the researchers' control. Resilient responses to this unpredictability vary; here, I suggest embracing flexibility and reflexivity despite lacking control. This reflective paper discusses the commonalities I shared with my research participants, the implications our shared identities had on the power dynamics during the data-collection and offers a differed interpretation of researcher's resilience when following an insider's perspective.

Focus groups are usually seen as semi-formal discussions in which the moderator observes and navigates the conversation (Krueger, 1994), often conceptualised as a research site and not simply as a research tool (Hollander, 2004). When the moderator is a member of the group, the power dynamics are subverted, and participants' interaction might resemble everyday discussions that take place in a non-threatening environment. The use of insider focus groups as a research method aims to limit the inherent power imbalance in research contexts (Råheim et al., 2016) and enables the participants to create a collective consensus through uncensored debate and discussion (Walters, 2020). Nevertheless, relinquishing control and confessing moments of vulnerability in research remains a difficult conversation especially when robust qualitative research has been interlinked with anticipation/calculation of participants' responses (Rahman et al., 2021) and the production of resilient solutions to moderate group discussions. In this paper, I argue that resilience in my insider research

occurred by accepting the unpredictability of participants' (inter)action and my limited control as the researcher and by reflecting on the implications the reversed power play had on the fieldwork.

The study

My research investigates young people's views on 'EU memberships and referenda' using the case of 'Brexit' based on 20 online focus groups conducted during 2020. In my study, I was an insider; a member of the communities I was researching with shared culture, language, and social status. Unsurprisingly, plenty of the interests, concerns, and the complexity of belonging to social groups that concerned the participants resonated with me especially in an era of uncertainty with the unforeseen implications of COVID-19 and 'Brexit'. The participants (including the researcher) were current students or recent graduates in London between 18-30 years old. Therefore, most of us raised concerns around the academic and professional opportunities in the UK and the impact 'Brexit' might have on the social, political, and academic life. Furthermore, our lived experiences were often informed by our field of studies and experiences, including living within a pandemic, and being urged to adapt and transit our study, and social interactions to the digital environment. Although the researchers' status as insiders/outsiders might change from one moment to another (Merton, 1972), I argue that sharing social characteristics and actively participating in the lived experiences of the group (Griffith, 1998) specify my 'research insiderness'.

Inside(r) focus groups

Insider focus groups, thanks to the redressed hierarchies, can transform the participants from 'informants' to 'experts' in the research process (Walters, 2020). Due to the informal setting, participants are more likely to feel comfortable and confident sharing personal views and experiences, but also establishing their expertise on the topic. In my study, the participants reflected on their own knowledge, expertise in their field, and social contexts to support their claims and justify their views based on evidence. Thus, 'Europe' and 'Brexit' were presented and discussed from different perspectives: legal, financial, political, philosophical, sociological etc. based on the participants' academic background which stimulated the discussion and the negotiation of meaning in context, while requiring minimum intervention from the moderator.

These sophisticated, theory-informed, and evidence-based arguments along with the participants' own research, understanding, and application of existing literature to articulate 'Europe', 'Brexit', and its implications, produced rich data and offered new, unexpected insights to explore, which were entirely data-driven. Unavoidably, during the focus groups the participants' expertise was evident so I would embrace it to demonstrate their impact on the data and encourage them to further elaborate by sharing their conceptualised views. Admitting the participants' expertise often indicated my unfamiliarity with specific terms and existing literature (for example European laws in relation to Brexit), which exposed my vulnerability in moderating a discussion among experts (in their field), but ultimately allowed the participants to take a position of authority in the focus group (Harrison & Ogden, 2021). This also demonstrated that the participants saw me as a member of the group instead of an

‘expert’, someone with ‘greater knowledge’ or ‘in charge’ of the discussion.

Previous qualitative research suggests that participants’ response and interaction is unpredictable and emphasizes the researcher’s need to waive control (Walters, 2020) and allow participants to orchestrate the conversation. During insider research, not only the discussion might be diverted from the planned topic guide/questions, but the participants might bring their own agenda (Råheim et al., 2016) to seize the discussion and take it in new directions. In my research, it was evident that the participants came prepared to raise specific issues that concerned them, which is exactly what I had hoped- that the focus groups would operate as a platform for the elucidation of participants’ priorities. For example, when discussing the implications of ‘Brexit’, one participant made comparisons between the ‘Brexit’ and the ‘Scottish referendum’ reflecting on the possibility of (and their preference for) an ‘Independent Scotland’, which motivated others to question whether this ‘Independent Scotland’ would be part of the EU. Her response was:

This is, obviously, an emotionally strong and poetic way to communicate her view, but it was one of the key phrases used by the Scottish National Party in their ‘Remain’ campaign, too. This does not diminish by any means the validity and significance of this point but illustrates that the participants joined the discussion having decided not only ‘what to talk about’ but also how to frame their arguments. Furthermore, it provides interesting insights in the ways the participant articulates and negotiates her identity and expresses her sense of belonging to specific groups and communities. This phrase generated an extended discussion about the role of Scotland within the UK and invited others to ask questions, get in her shoes and reflect on ‘Brexit’ from a different point of view. In addition, this example illustrates the co-construction of meaning in group discussions by the selection of specific words, phrases, and examples to communicate understandings, experiences, and world views.

Conclusion

Insider focus groups cannot fully remove the researchers’ control but can reduce the traditional power dynamics in research and allow the participants to shape the conversation. The unpredictability of insider research is often combined by resilient strategies; for example, to minimize, maximize, incorporate, or utilise ‘insiderness’ (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013) in relation to the researchers’ experience and power. In my case, resilience did not emerge as a problem-based response; it was simply developed by embracing my limited control in insider research and by allowing as much freedom and space as possible for the participants to take the lead. Being transparent and reflective was the way to cope with uncertainty and produce rich data in insider focus groups. This approach might not be appropriate in every setting, but I hope that this reflective piece will encourage other insider researchers to explore ways that could empower the participants/communities involved, build resilience to deal with uncertainty in focus groups and integrate critical reflection in the research practice.

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