

Qualitative Research Methods: how to Ask and Whom to Ask? A Comparison between Focus Group and In-depth Interviews[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines the differences in the information obtained through in-depth interviews comparing to those gathered from focus group on a topic related to immigration and refugee’s crisis for Romanians. The main purpose of the study is to illustrate the importance of using multiple methods when a sensitive topic is investigated. Despite the general consideration that in-depth interviews are more accurate for immersing into the beliefs of an individual, this research showed that, for this specific topic, focus group is better in revealing deeper thoughts and opinions. The findings add to the literature, demonstrating the power of group discussion in unveiling the opinions that may be considered avoidable in an individual discussion. Despite the limits of the study, this empirical research may open further avenues for investigation about qualitative research methods and their use for different purposes and for different topics.

Introduction

For going deeper into individual thoughts, motivations or behavior, for exploring people’s perspectives on some idea or situations, qualitative research is the most suitable method.

Despite its limits, generated mostly by the active role of the researcher in the collecting data process and by

the fact that the results cannot be generalized qualitative research explains that in some cases “why” is at least as important as “how many”[1].

Qualitative methods are used to address research questions that require explanation or understanding of social phenomena and their contexts [2, p.5]. The most used methods for collecting information in a qualitative research are in-depth interview and focus group. Focus group and in-depth interview complement each other and many times they are used together.

In-depth interview involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives, their thoughts, motivations, expectations or experiences on a particular situation [3]. In-depth interviews combine structure with flexibility [4, p.141] and offer information about what happened and why happened from the perspective of an individual. In-depth interviews are more appropriate when the interviewee may not feel comfortable to talk open in a group or if the aim of the research is to distinguish individual (as opposed to group) opinions about a certain topic [3].

If the strength of an in-depth interview lies on the exploration of the individual opinion, focus group pulls its assets from the interaction between people, from the dynamic and from the synergy the discussions generate [5, p.79], [6]. “The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview. When group dynamics work well the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions” Kitzinger 1995 in [7, p.800].

It is this particular characteristic of the focus group that determined this specific research. For some sensitive topics, during in-depth interviews, the interviewee may feel judged or misunderstood if he or she expresses an opinion that may be considered not to be “politically correct”² [8, p.159]; therefore, focus groups may prove to be a better method that reflect “the social nature of knowledge” [9, p.155]. As Bogardus described since 1926, focus group is a tool for understanding people’s attitudes and opinions about different social issues, such as race relations [10, p.188]. It is the case of this specific research, when focus group has been proven to be a more appropriate method of collecting information than the in-depth interviews.

Methodology

The Context of the Research

The aim of the research was to identify the opinion of the respondents and the reasons that motivate these opinions related to the question “Should Romania accept the immigration quotas imposed by the EU in the context of the refugee’s crises”, at the moment of 2016. This was a critical year for the EU and a great interest was cast, at all levels, about the solidarity the countries of the EU should manifest towards this crisis. At that moment (2016), few countries of the EU rejected the proposal coming from France and Germany to open the gates of the EU for the refugees: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Romania.

The case of Romania was different from the other three countries that opposed to this initiative. Romania is not part of the Schengen area; therefore, there are fewer threats for Romania to have a large number of refugees at its borders. Romania is poorer than the other three countries and it was supposed that the number of the refugees allocated to Romania would be one of the smallest, with lower impact on the population.

Also, Romania is one of the EU countries with the highest emigration rate. Over 3 million of Romanians are considered to live outside Romanian borders, mostly in European countries such as Italy, Spain, France and Germany. It would be expected that the refugees may be a solution to the demographic deficit and the

aging population Romania faces.

Surveys conducted in Romania about immigration issues, mostly about what Romanians think about the refugees' crisis revealed a moderate favorable attitude. In a study conducted by the IRES in 2015 [11], at the question: "As a member state of the EU, do you consider that Romania should receive a certain number of refugees?" 65% of the respondents expressed their total or partial agreement to this statement. However, only 46% agreed (totally or partially) to accept refugees in their town, which raise the question about what people do in reality think about these sensitive topics and how much can you rely on surveys.

Another aim of the research was to have a comparison between in-depth interviews and focus groups in terms of the similarity and richness of this information. The literature mentions the importance of such comparisons [6, p.138] and the fact that different results may be obtained.

The Design of the Research

The research was conducted from May to August 2016 and consisted in 2 focus groups and thirteen in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews and focus groups have been conducted with the same participants. The same method was used in studies directed by Wight (1994) and Kitzinger (1994) [6].

The thirteen interviewees were homogenous from the point of view of age (50 to 57 years old), education (tertiary level) and balanced between men and women (seven women and six men). The focus groups also were gender balanced. One group was composed of three men and three women and the second one consists of four women and three men.

The researchers knew all the interviewees and the relationship between the participants and the researchers was a cordial and trustful one. Also, the interviewees knew each other.

Because of this amiable atmosphere, the role of the researchers was just to keep the discussion on the track, which helped the participants to express their opinion and to generate very rich discussions. This is in line with the observation made by McLafferty [10, p.188], who pointed out that focus groups formed of strangers require more moderator intervention.

The research started with in-depth interviews around the questions: "Should Romania accept immigrants, in general, and refugees, in particular? What is your opinion about this? Why do you consider that?"

The topic investigated was very well-known to all the participants. Media made extensive reports during 2015 and 2016 on this topic and the general public was aware about this situation.

The first in-depth interviews have performed during May 2016 with 6 persons (3 women and 3 men). The same 6 persons formed the first focus group which was performed in June 2016.

The next discussion was with the rest of the interviewees, 7 persons (4 women and 3 men), during June and July, 2016, on the same question. These 7 persons formed the second focus group which was conducted after the interviews, in August 2016.

The interviews took from 10 to 25 minutes and the focus groups lasted for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. Both researchers participated as moderators in focus groups and in- depth interviews.

To keep the trust, researchers took notes from the discussions. The anonymity of the persons involved in the research was kept. Only the gender and the age are real. The names are fictive.

This empirical research has obvious limitations. There are only two focus group and only 13 in-depth interviews and because of the small number of the participants the results may be interpret as being accidental. However, the outcomes are in line with the findings from other similar studies, which add value to the results and other avenues of investigations are opened by this research.

Findings

The first 6 in-depth interviews reveal an ambiguous attitude of all the participants. The same ambiguity has been observed with the other 7 interviewees. People seemed to be quite careful in their affirmations, weighing the words well: “Yes, it is a drama, those people need help” (Maria, 51), “depends on what they want. I saw they do not want to come to Romania, so, why to force them to come to our country if they do not want to come” (Andrei, 55), “It will be a big challenge for us, you have to spend a lot of resources to accommodate them, they do not speak the language, it will be very difficult” (Victor, 57). Almost everybody tried to avoid a clear answer of yes or no to the first question.

The essence of the discussions during in-depth interviews was that it is very difficult to make a clear statement, because there are so many data that we probably don't know: “it is a tragedy, of course, we have to help them, but we have to have more information. Are all of them leaving because of the war or some of them are looking for the social benefits? Media offers so much and controversial information; it is so difficult to have a position. I don't know what to say” (Ema, 52).

The feeling of the researchers was that interviewees were worried about being labeled as nationalists, insensitive, or intolerant. Only four persons (two women – Ana and Octavia and two men – Sebastian and Cristian) were firm during their interviews. Three of them sustained that Romania should not accept refugees and the immigration policy should be strongly controlled (Ana, Sebastian and Cristian). “There are so many problems with those refugees and we have our own problems, too. I don't think that Romania should accept refugees and, about immigrants, in general, this policy has to be strictly controlled” (Ana, 53). The fourth considered that Romania should accept refugees and should be more open to immigration: “We like to be considered tolerant, open mind and Europeans, but only for happy situation. When it comes to contribute during hard times, we are poor, we have problems, and we need help! This is not the Christian spirit! And about immigration: Who will pay our pension? Apart of being sensitive or empathic, we have to think in economic terms, also. We will be, in less than 20 years, a very old nation, without workforce. We need immigrants!” (Octavia, 52).

The discussions in the both focus groups, on the other hand, were much more animated and richer in opinion. These opinions were much clearer in opposing to the idea of accepting refugees and in adopting an open policy towards immigration. Launching the same question “Should Romania accept immigrants, in general, and refugees, in particular? What is your opinion about this? Why do you consider that?” Ana pointed out “I don’t know what the others consider, and I am not intolerant or insensitive or nationalist, but I reaffirm my position I have told you when we discussed privately. I do not consider that Romania should accept refugees and we have to be strict on immigration. We do not have the capacity to integrate them and this will be bad for us and for them”. Maria, who was evasive in the in-depth interview, continued: “the same with me. I am so sorry for the drama of those persons, but looked at us. We have our own problems; our people are leaving the country because there are no good jobs, small wages, and bad infrastructure. What to do with these immigrants? We are not capable to keep our compatriots at home, and we bring strangers?”. “Let’s be honest. It is a risk of terrorism and it seems that we ignore it. It is true; I know that you will say: no terrorist attack was in Romania. I will tell you: not yet!” (Vlad, 55) “They don’t want to come, so, why to force them? I am sure that there are other possibilities to help them without bringing these people into our country” (Andrei, 55). “Instead of spending money on immigration, we should bring our people home. That money to accommodate refugees, to integrate them, spends them for your own people; offer them something to come home or to stop them to leave” (Victor, 57). “Well, there are so many elements we don’t know. One think is clear to me. We are not ready to receive them (refugees) (Ema, 52). The only person who was in favor of accepting refugees and in adopting a more open policy towards immigration and who reaffirmed what she said in the in-depth interview was the target of arguments against her opinion. “You said that the Christian spirit is to accept them, no matter what. Well, they are not Christians. They do not share the same values as us” (Elena, 55). “You are correct about who will pay our pension in the future. But I have the answer: Those over 3 million of Romanians leaving and working abroad! Bring them home and here is your pension! (Cristian, 53) “No free speech nowadays! If you are against to open the gates of the EU, you are not a true European, you are xenophobe or intolerant! Give me a break! As I have told you previously (in-depth interview), in my opinion, to be a European you have to do your job, in a correct and honorable way. And those who run the EU and Romania should do the same. I do not see any honorable way of doing their job when the unemployment rate among youth is so high! And I have thousands of examples!” (Sebastian, 50)

It was clear that focus groups created an atmosphere where people felt free to express their opinion without any constraints regarding how they will be perceived. The emotion expressed during the focus group may be explained by the trust created among the participants, by the feeling that nobody will judge you and by the synergy coming from the force of the group: “there are people who think like me, it is time to speak out, without any censorship!” Also, the nature and the actuality of the topic were suitable for a group discussion. During 2016, all news channels started broadcasting news about the situation of refugees at the borders, creating a feeling of siege, with images with refugees climbing walls, destroying fences and attacking trains to run to Germany. Some of the participants perceived those images as an invasion of their way of life. Focus group created conditions to express concerns about their future. All those reasons behind the negative attitude towards refugees and immigration are determined, in fact, by the failure of the state in providing public good, in offering predictability for the future, in creating trust that prosperity will reach, finally, every person in this country. The huge number of Romanian working abroad create the sentiment that this country is not capable to offer opportunities for its people and immigrants will consume from these already scarce resources. It is also an indicator of a low integration of already existing minorities and

perceived as being ‘problematic minorities’ (Roma minorities).

Another explanation may be the cultural context. Romanians consider themselves as being very tolerant, but it seems that there is a positive biased self-perception. In a study performed by the World Values Survey in 2010-2014 [14], the percentage of Romanian respondents saying they wouldn’t want foreign workers or immigrants for neighbors reached the level of 21 percent-higher than the percentage of respondents saying the same in countries as Poland (7 percent) or Ukraine (19 percent), and around the same percentage as in Germany.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this research may be viewed on two directions.

One direction is in relationship with the purpose of the research, to demonstrate the capacity of focus group to grab more and stronger sustained information comparing to in- depth interviews, in specific situation and for specific issues. This study, despite its limitations, demonstrates that complex and sensitive issues have to be investigating using a mix of methods. Using only one method the results may be incomplete and the reasons staying behind some attitudes cannot be fully understood.

From this research it was very clear that people are rather reluctant to accept refugees and to agree with an open policy toward immigration. Reasons are related, in fact, to the failure of the authorities to provide public goods as security in general, prosperity for the large population, and trust in good and correct governance. The magnitude of this reluctance can be measured through a quantitative research. However, to identify and to understand the reasons behind this are very important if it is looking for public support in implementing some programs designated to integrate immigrants and not only, or when it comes to overcome populist messages.

The second direction the conclusions lead is related to future research that this study can open. How tolerant are we? How vulnerable to manipulation are we? Is the attitude expressed in this study a result of a cultural context, is it a result of manipulation or is it a psychological effect of the exposé to human misery and suffering? Morgan states in one of his article that ‘the differences between what an individual says in an in-depth interview or in a focus group is as much as statement about our culture as our method’ [6, p.139]. These kinds of questions may be future avenues of investigation that this study could open.

[1] There is an equal contribution of the authors to this paper.

[2] Being “politically correct” is defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary “as agreeing with the idea that people should be careful to not use language or behave in a way that could offend a particular group of people”. There is a large debate about the consequences of promoting this kind of language in the public discourse. Some (as US Senator Ted Cruz) consider that “political correctness is killing people” [12], others see political correctness as a respectful or polite behavior [13, p.3]. Not too many people, for instance, would be happy to be considered a racist because of a remark. Therefore, people may be careful to what they say about some topics and this attention is interpreted by some as a barrier to the freedom of speech.

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