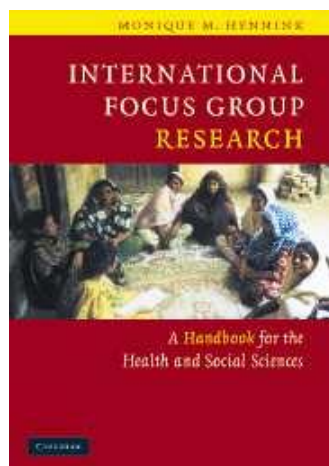


## Book Review



### **International Focus Group Research: A Handbook for the Health and Social Sciences**

by Monique M. Hennink

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007).

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Review by **Sharon Leslie Tao**

Since the 1990s, focus groups have become a widely used exploratory tool within the social sciences, not least for their practical benefits of gleaning large volumes of information and a range of participants' views in a succinct amount of time, but also for the instrumental role they play in various research endeavours. For example, focus groups often provide the qualitative, in-depth data collection to complement the quantitative surveys used in mixed methods research designs - as well as the platform for public scrutiny and debate that is integral to participatory research aiming to give voice to marginalised groups. Given strengths such as these, focus group discussions have been increasingly used to inform policy and practice in areas such as education, gender and health, particularly in developing country contexts. However, despite the broader application of focus groups, much of the existing literature does not address the practical, methodological or ethical issues of conducting focus groups in non-Western contexts. This has provided cause for Monique M. Hennink's book, *International Focus Group Research: A Handbook for the Health and Social Sciences*. It is a book for those who conduct, review and use focus group research in academic and practitioner-based research in developing country contexts. Its strength comes in its highly detailed and comprehensive understanding of how culture, language and material realities interface with the task of focus group data collection, and it offers many helpful insights that assist researchers in pre-empting and navigating potential difficulties.

The structure of the book follows the process of planning and conducting focus group research, with each chapter addressing a different stage of the method. Initial chapters detail planning tasks prior to fieldwork, such as estimating timetables and budgets, recruiting a field team, incentives for participants and ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Such tasks are integral to all types of focus groups, however Hennink locates these within developing country contexts, offering examples of informed consent forms used in research in Rwanda. In addition, there are extracts of experiences that researchers had whilst recruiting a Zambian field team to conduct groups in two regions with different cultural and linguistic traditions. Such examples not only provide the reader with extremely practical and experience-based guidance, but also allow the reader to easily envisage their own upcoming research in context.

The subsequent chapters offer similar levels of pragmatic guidance in regards to tasks associated with executing a focus group. For example, chapter 3 goes into a great deal of detail on preparing and structuring the discussion guide, not only in respect to general principles of question design, probing, and gaining in-depth discussion, but also in practical

matters of translating and back-translating questions (to ensure clarity) and using culturally appropriate questioning strategies.

Chapter 4 discusses the importance of training in-country field staff and offers guidance in training everyone from moderators to note-takers, transcribers and field staff. The chapter is in itself a helpful check list of things to cover, offering advice on how to train someone in equipment operation, moderating techniques, ethical issues and identification of potential problems or hindrances, amongst others. Again, Hennink locates these tasks within developing country contexts and offers a self-reflexive perspective that can assist and sensitise expatriate readers or 'trainers' who may be just as new to the training process as the trainees themselves.

The bulk of the book (chapters 5 – 10) offers guidance in regards to issues relating to participants and conducting the actual discussions. What makes these chapters helpful are their relevance to issues that are intrinsic to certain developing country contexts, such as identifying community 'gatekeepers' like tribal chiefs to gain permission and/or assistance during recruitment, discouraging onlookers if the focus group has to be conducted in an outdoor or communal setting, and concurrently translating and transcribing recordings if budgets or timeframes do not allow for the production of transcripts in two languages. Given such issues, Hennink adroitly avoids homogenising across all contexts; rather, specific examples of field experiences are offered and readers are left to discern for themselves whether such examples apply to their context.

The last two chapters deal with issues of data analysis and reporting. However, these sections seem to be lacking the same rigour and detail that make the rest of the book so helpful and rewarding to read. This could be due to Hennink's very pragmatic approach towards planning and conducting focus groups may be less applicable to matters of data analysis and theory production. Although attention is given to the process of coding and identifying themes, there is a tacit assumption that by following practical steps such as these, scholarly knowledge of the social phenomenon in question can be easily gained. Hennink elides a discussion of the philosophical or theoretical issues relating to the building of explanations from data, which is understandable since the aim of the book is not a 'how to' on qualitative data analysis. However, an acknowledgement of these issues might mitigate the implication that building explanations or identifying causal links is a straightforward (and achievable) process, which in some interpretivist circles, is a highly contested issue.

That said, on the whole Hennink's book is extremely helpful. As a doctoral student intending to conduct focus groups with teachers in Tanzania, I have found this book extremely insightful and wish I could condense it into pocket form for my travels. Researchers who seek guidance on how to plan and conduct groups in developing country contexts will not only be prepared for potential challenges, but will be able to make informed research decisions when in the field. As an academic seeking analytical rigour, I would caution on relying on the book as a one-stop shop for guidance on both data collection and analysis. However, as a researcher seeking methodological guidance, Hennink's book delivers in spades.