

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITY

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TOPIC: WOMEN AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Context

- The Instructor will interview three female doctoral students, who will be themselves, and will, accordingly, act as if they were being interviewed by a researcher.
- This is a focus group, and attention must be paid to the relationship that the three interviewees may or may not have as well as how they may react to one another or to the interviewer.
- Although this is somewhat of a superficial scenario, in that we are doing this as a practicum, it is useful to observe the interplay between the interviewer and interviewees as well as between interviewees, including tone, discourse, body language and unarticulated or omitted content.
- The interviewees will be told that this is a practicum, although we are to role-play as if it were a bone-fide focus group, and the subject is women and educational leadership.

Getting started

- Greet the three interviewees.
- Introductions.
- Overview of the topic and approach for the focus group (roughly 20 minutes).
- Ask if there is any objection to the interview being taped for accuracy purposes.
- Assure them of anonymity.
- Emphasize that the interviewer is appreciative of their time, and that an opportunity will be provided at the end of the interview to provide any points or information that may have been overlooked.
- Re-assure them that some of the subject-matter may be contentious, and that the interviewer does not wish to make anyone feel uncomfortable, thus allowing for critical discussion; invite interviewees to comment if they feel uncomfortable or if they do not wish to entertain certain questions.
- Emphasize that, as a researcher, some of the questions, terminology and assumptions may not effectively cover the subject at-hand, so interviewees are encouraged to provide their frank and insightful feedback as they have experiences and perspectives that the researcher would not have.
- It is important to point out the obvious: the interviewer is a male, and the interviewees are female; therefore, explain why this topic was chosen, and also how the male interviewer would have an outsider perspective into this subject.
- Lastly, ask interviewees if they have questions before starting.

Interview Protocol

1. The context above will be covered. (Attention will be paid to ensuring that all participants are comfortable, and are able to participate freely)
2. Let's start with an overview of how each of you have succeeded in education. What has your experience been like? (As a follow-up: please elaborate on what some of the differences might be for you in educational leadership and men; in other words, does gender matter?)
3. Would you say that you have faced barriers? Or do you feel that things have been pretty fair with respect to your career in education? (As a follow-up: do you think that women face discrimination based on gender? Harassment based on gender? Elaborate.)
4. Some people believe that women are not tough enough to be leaders in education, that they are more inclined to be empathetic and work for consensus. What do you think of that notion?
5. Do you think that having women in leadership positions is good for society? Is there a tangible impact on equity in general for the betterment of society? (As a follow-up: Does women in leadership positions equate more social justice and equity for all marginalized groups, including racial minorities, lower SES groups, Aboriginal peoples, and other minorities? How?)
6. If you could make one or two changes to way education is organized in relation to women and leadership, what would you do? (As a follow-up: What would the ideal system look like? Elaborate.)
7. Are there any issues that we have not addressed that you would like to comment on?
8. As a last question, I would be interested in knowing how you might research this topic. Is there any advice you might be able to give me, things to look for...
9. End interview. Explain the next steps, and how they can contact the interviewer should they have any further comments or questions.

Points to consider

According to BERG (2007) in *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, there are four types of questions:

- a) *Essential questions* (concern the central focus of the study);
- b) *Extra questions* (to validate the reliability of responses);
- c) *Throw-away questions* (used to gather demographic data, and to “cool” out a sensitive subject);
- d) *Probing questions* (used to seek more information, and to elicit elaboration of responses already provided).

Be concerned with levels of language (real and symbolic), “code switching”, insider vocabulary, and content of language (discourse analysis).

Question formulation

- a) some words may cause participants to react negatively, which may not be helpful unless there is a desired objective;
- b) Berg suggests that the word *Why* may unnecessarily produce a negative response;
- c) Avoid double-barrelled questions (asks a subject to respond simultaneously to two issues in a single question; these questions should be separated)
- d) Complex questions (make sure that interviewees understand the questions, that they are not laden with thoughts, concepts, jargon, acronyms, etc. that may not be easily understood)
- e) Question sequencing may alter the responses acquired (Berg suggests that the interview begin with mild, non-threatening questions (e.g., demographic matters) leading, gradually, into more complex and sensitive questions)

Interviewer posture

- a) Rapport
- b) Role
- c) Rhythm
- d) Empathy
- e) Disclosures
- f) Impression-management
- g) Motivations
- h) Benefits
- i) Intuition
- j) Social interpretations
- k) Non-verbal communication
- e) Unconscious and unintended results
- f) Performance
- g) Interviewer as Actor, Director and/or Choreographer
- h) Influence over the interviewees

- i) Uncomfortable silence and echoing must be avoided

Berg's ten commandments of interviews

- 1) never begin an interview cold
- 2) remember your purpose
- 3) present a natural front
- 4) demonstrate aware hearing
- 5) think about appearance
- 6) interview in a comfortable place
- 7) don't be satisfied with monosyllabic answers
- 8) be respectful
- 9) practice, practice, and practice some more
- 10) be cordial and appreciative

MERRIAM (1998) in *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* identifies four types of interviewer questions:

- a) *Hypothetical question*: asks what the respondent might do or what it might be like in a particular situation; usually begins with "What if" or "Suppose";
- b) *Devil's advocate question*: challenges the respondent to consider an opposing view;
- c) *Ideal position question*: asks the respondent to describe an ideal situation;
- d) *Interpretive question*: advances tentative interpretation of what the respondent has been saying and asks for a reaction.

Avoid:

- a) multiple (double-barrelled) questions
- b) leading questions
- c) yes-or-no questions

Other strategic issues

- a) Problematize the insider, outsider or insider/outsider status of the interviewer.
- b) Be cognizant of habits, movements, reactions, etc., and also if notes are taken (when and how).
- c) Start at the macro-level and become more specific, allowing for general and missed comments at the end;
- d) Be flexible.