

The design of focus groups in a comparative study of conceptions of safety and attitudes towards civil possession of firearms in the upper-middle class and lower class in Buenos Aires.

Authors:

María Alejandra Otamendi & María Pía Otero¹

Gino Germani Research Institute - University of Buenos Aires

& Association for Public Policies (APP)

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Abstract:

The objective of this presentation is to reflect on the methodological decisions in a comparative study that uses focus groups to analyse conceptions of safety and attitudes towards possession of firearms among middle and working class people. We analyse our role as researchers taking into account our social background and the problems we had pertaining to the social context from where the subjects of the study come from.

Our reflections are focused on the decisions we have made regarding the recruitment of focus groups' participants, the design of the interview guide, and the moderator's role in group dynamics.

Data come from two upper-middle class focus groups and one lower-class focus group carried out from August to October 2004 in Buenos Aires. The criteria used to organize them were, besides social class, the possession of firearms, age and gender.

Introduction

Our purpose in this paper is to reflect on methodological aspects of a study which objective was to explore the perceptions about citizen security and the attitudes towards possession of firearms among middle and working class people in Buenos Aires. Some related issues were also inquired, such as the images lay people develop about the agencies in charge of citizen security.

In order to understand “the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences”, we decided to conduct a qualitative study from the “participants’ perspective” (Maxwell, 1996: 17).

People develop their opinions, perceptions and attitudes in interaction with significant others both in conversation encounters or in processes of self-reflection. Therefore, as a focus group consists of open discussions in a group we used this method to produce data about participants’ social representations, knowledge, beliefs and perceptions on the civil possession of firearms and citizen security, and on the images of the police, the justice and the politicians in charge. That’s why the method of focus group was an appropriate strategy regarding the above-mentioned objectives.

We also decided to conduct a focus group because: it has low costs; it is possible to obtain results in a short period of time and it is a flexible strategy that allows searching emergent subjects during the discussion (Krueger 1994).

We conducted three focus groups to answer the research objectives with adults residents in Buenos Aires of both genders. Two of them were integrated by upper-middle class adults of, but only one of them satisfied the condition of being firearms owners. Members that were part of the third group belonged to the working class and didn't possess firearms. Taking into account that it is an exploratory study, we decided to conduct four groups following Morgan's recommendations in this sense (Morgan, 1996).

Participants' Recruitment

In order to find the participants for each group we had to decide who we were going to interview, how to contact them, how many of them, where to develop the meeting, and what kind of presents we were going to give them. As we are going to show next, these decisions implied some particular difficulties according to the social class of the groups' members.

It is important to select participants that share socio-economic characteristics, belong to the same ethnic and age groups, have similar educational level, and do not know each other in order to act as the voice of their social group. Homogenous groups also contribute to create good conditions for the participants to develop their points of view.

In our study we found very useful some of these suggestions. We decided to include people from both genders within each group because they represent more faithfully

every day life and interaction. According to the subject, if it is assumed that feminine collective is different from the masculine one, members from different genders should not be mixed in a same group. However, in our study it was confirmed by our experience that gender did not biased the discussion as we originally thought.

The number of participants was around six persons (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990:10, MacIntosh, 1993 and Krueger, 1994), and all of them were elder than 30 years old. Unfortunately, this broad criteria for the age made more difficult for participants to identify with each other. For example, in the working class group, this happened because we had two women in their sixties and the other participants were in their thirties.

The reasons why we decided to gather only citizens from Buenos Aires are that this area is seen as one of the most violent in Argentina by the public opinion and the media. Besides, this urban region, at least from official sources and estimations, is the place where more firearms circulate: according to the RENAR², 50% of the legal possessors live in this area. Finally, it was accessible and affordable for us to organize meetings in this area.

Another criteria to organize focus groups was the social class. We assumed that the social position restricts the possible experiences people can have and therefore, affects their opinions about security, public agencies and firearms. To select people from the same social class, we chose persons with the same educational background for the

² RENAR: National Registry of Firearms.

middle class groups (with graduate studies) and the place of residence for the lower-class group (shanty towns).

It was easy to recruit people for the two middle class groups as we share the same social background. It was also easy because they were familiarized with research methods and they know that their opinions are valuable. The venue for the meeting, APP's office in downtown, was also familiar to them because it is an administrative area. The time of the day of the meeting was set after work since all of the participants invited had jobs.

After conducting the first middle-class group, we analysed the profile of the participants from the information provided by a self-administered questionnaire. We found that some of them were businessmen or landlords. Therefore, to select people for the other middle-class group without firearms, we tried to recruit individuals with similar social background. Doing so, we guaranteed that differences in their perceptions were not due to their social position.

In order to compare opinions regarding the social class, a third group was organized with members from shantytowns. The way to contact them had to be planned in advance as we don't have any acquaintances that live there. Therefore, we asked for help to other NGO that has been working with community based organizations for three years. After we told them our research interests, they suggested us a particular neighbourhood to conduct the focus groups. The main reasons why they preferred this site were the kindness of their contacts there and the easy accessibility to the place. They warned us that we should be careful with our language because the meaning of some words would be misunderstood. This made us think about the general issue of indexicality. For

example, in English and in the Academia we use the nouns “inquiry” and “study” as synonyms. The same happens with the Spanish words “investigación” and “estudio”. However, lay people, specially those with lower educational level, understand them in different ways: they relate inquiry to crime and study to academic research. Therefore, we had to be aware of these possible language misunderstandings.

The members from the NGO introduced us a couple that are recognised as leaders in the neighbourhood where they have a community kitchen. These leaders were supposed to recruit the people for the focus groups. Thus, we told them our purposes and the criteria to select participants. Although they were friendly and helpful with us, it took several visits and conversations with them to organize the groups. They were not familiarized with this kind of meetings because they are used to receive talks from professionals but not to be asked for their opinions. It also took us more time to explain them the profile of participants we were looking for and to earn their trust on us and on the research purposes.

The interactions with the gatekeepers/doorman (the leaders) to organize the focus groups in poor neighbourhoods require from the researchers a personal involvement that exceeds the specific research topics and the arrangements of the venue. For example, the woman in charge of the community kitchen as a social leader is used to listen to other people problems and to mediate on their behalf. Therefore, she shared with us all these problems and tried to find emotional support in us. In a way, she also needed to be listened and to be supported. This situation demanded from us to put into practice some social skills and to listen respectfully to her thoughts, without judging her.

At the same time, we realised that the themes we were interested in were not those that worried them the most. Thus, they tried to include their concerns in the agenda and they asked us to assist them. Since they are used to receive assistance from social workers, they also expected from us to give them goods and services to improve their material situation and to contempt them psychologically. At this point, we were getting involved in a client-like relationship: in order to pursue our research purposes, we were asked to give them what they want.

In this interaction with them, we found ourselves in a dilemma that made us reflect on how much a researcher should get involved while dealing with poor people. Although we had the intention to help them from the beginning of the study, we thought doing so by giving them voice to their security demands. However, afterwards we realized that this was not the kind of help they were expecting from us. Thus, our role as researchers became problematic: do we quit our academic purposes and help them? Or should we try to impose our goals to them? We decided to go on with the study, and to collect some donations for them. We wonder which are the frontiers of the role of researchers in a context where people are accustomed to deal with social workers and to consequently expect help from them.

The arrangements for the meeting were agreed with the leaders. The place chosen was the community kitchen because it was a close and familiar place for everyone in the neighbourhood. So the time had to be fixed taking into account the meals schedule. The lasting of the group discussion was conditioned by this schedule. Nevertheless, it was enough time to carry out the group in a friendly atmosphere.

As we have said previously, the focus group method requires that people within a group do not know each other. This could not be fulfilled in the lower-class group because our selection criteria was their place of residence so all of them were close neighbours. Although in their accounts this familiarity is evident, we believe they felt free to express their opinions. Besides, if we wanted to organize groups with members from different neighbourhoods, we would have had different inconveniences such as the lack of trust among them and some logistical problems. In these social sector, it takes more time to trust others, specially in a group, so we realized that it's convenient to organize groups integrated by acquaintances rather than strangers. Also, it would have implied more time and money to organize these groups because we would have had to know contacts from different places, to convince participants to be part of a group with strangers far from their houses and to transport everyone to a special location.

Firearms possession as a recruitment criteria

Another criteria used to organize groups was the possession of firearms in order to compare attitudes towards them and images of the agencies in charge of citizen security regarding firearm ownership. As the objective of the study was to analyse lay people's attitudes, we decided to exclude from the groups criminals and police officials and security agents.

As we said before, to recruit middle-class persons with or without firearms was not difficult because we belong to the same social class. Since the recruitment of the participants for the middle-class group with firearms owners was done through our acquaintances, we knew that these persons have firearms without asking them directly. Thus, it was not necessary to tell them in advance that one of the topics of the

discussion would be firearms possession. Instead we preferred to pose a general topic as citizen security to gather them. We found this was an advantage because in this way participants did not come to the meeting with a structured speech and the interaction was more open and spontaneous.

As part of this study, we have planned to carry out a lower-class focus group with firearms possessors. After many attempts this was not possible for many reasons: first of all, as we have said before, because of the social distance that separates us from them. Secondly, the legal implications³ of the topic under discussion was a problem for the leader who was supposed to recruit neighbours with firearms. She may have felt that she had to give us some classified and private information about them that they did not want to share with us. It is possible that she was afraid that we worked for the police or for the secret services and that we were going to use that information against those people identified by her. Consequently, she wanted us to assure her that in our report places or persons were not going to be identified by their names. She was asking for anonymity and confidentiality.

Another reason why it was not possible to gather this group was that the control of the participants' selection was not in our hands, but in the leader's. We consider that she had a broader criteria than ours regarding reasons to possess firearms; for example, in one of the attempts she also invited young people from the neighbourhood who were involved in drug abuse. This probably happened because, according to her, the latter was the main social problem that affects her community and she wanted to share her concern

³ In Argentina, to possess a firearm without a license is considered a legal offence and it is punished with important fines and imprisonment.

with us. This was an obstacle to organize the fourth group because the people she invited did not comply with the characteristics of the universe of our study.

In general, we found that it was difficult to involve people from this context in group interviewing. We suppose this may happen because people from this social sector are not used to express their opinions in public and to expose themselves to the others' judgement. This showed us the weakness of this method to capture participants perspective in such social groups.

The design of the interview guide

In order to carry out the focus groups we designed an interview guide that included all the aspects we were interested in: attitudes towards firearms, perceptions of the current situation of security and the images of the police, the justice and the government. First of all, we included the guidelines for the group dynamics at the beginning of the guide: everyone is expected to express his/her point of view; the role of the moderator is just to organize the discussion, and the lasting of the meeting is approximately one hour and a half. The authorization to record the discussion, the commitment of confidentiality and anonymity, the purposes of the study, its institutional framework and the moderator personal introduction were part of the opening.

The reason given to invite participants to be part of the groups was in the first group the same one used to start the discussion: the problem of citizen security in Buenos Aires. We chose this topic because people are so worried about it that they are open to share

their opinions on this regard. Afterwards, we included in the guide some newspaper headlines to trigger discussion. This was a less intrusive way to address the sensitive theme we were interested in: attitudes towards firearms. Finally, some questions on related issues such as the police image were incorporated.

After the first group was done, we found the first question of the guide above mentioned too open and ambiguous. Therefore, we decided to replace it with the discussion about the newspaper headlines in order to focus the group interaction. The guide for the third group followed this order too.

Another difference was the inclusion of specific topics regarding the particular characteristics of the group members. In the group with firearms possessors we added questions about the decisions they have made to acquire a firearm, its description, the experiences of usage and the possibility to render them. In the non-possessors middle-class group we focused on the willingness to acquire a firearm for self-defence and the arguments against this. For the discussion within the third group we undertook, the lower-class one, we also realized that it could be interesting to ask the participants about violence victims' profile, so we did it. These changes in the interview guides were possible due to the flexibility of the research design in qualitative approach.

Moderator's role

Some authors (Krueger 1994) point out that the differences between moderator and participants regarding gender, race, age or socio-economic status could act as inhibitor

of discussion. This happened during the group integrated by lower-class members where the moderator had to encourage shy participants to express their opinions. Besides, members of this group showed with their non-verbal language, such as trying not to make eye-contact with others but the moderator, that they were more aware of her presence and less open to interact with each other. The moderator had to make more questions within this group so her presence was stronger than in the middle-class groups. This could not be avoided, even though participants of the lower-class group had met her before along the several visits she did previously to the neighbourhood. The difficulties to gain a fluent interaction among participants within this group was not only the moderator's presence but also the barriers shown in terms of age and gender.

On the contrary, during the two middle-class groups her role was to make open questions to the whole group and then to organize the debate because most of the participants were eager to talk. In these groups, her presence was not intrusive and the collective dynamic worked fine. Members of the groups could identify with each other, referring to themselves as "we". This later occurred not only in these groups, but also in the third group, unless it demanded more time and interventions of the moderator. In other words, the "voice" of the groups could emerge.

Conclusions and recommendations

During this research experience, both advantages and disadvantages of the focus group method appeared. On the one hand, this method gave us excellent results in middle-class groups. In these cases, people felt enough comfortable with each other and with

the moderator to express their opinions and feelings. Besides, it was easy and inexpensive to recruit them and to manage the organization of the groups.

On the contrary, trying to organize lower-class groups took us too much time and the results were not that good: we could not join people for the firearms' possessors group. However, it was a fertile idea to recruit participants from the same place of residence because we could develop rapport with our informants and through them became trustworthy to other people in the neighbourhood. Also, it was a right decision to organize meetings at the community kitchen because it is a familiar place for them. Although we tried to develop a naturalistic approach and we built a good relationship with them, we were always seen as strangers and this was a disadvantage in terms of the requirements of focus group method. Moreover, participants of this group did not feel comfortable with each other and were not eager to communicate and defend their opinions in public. It could be an alternative method to revert this attitude to conduct individuals' interviews. In general terms, we are likely to conduct individual interviews to capture the actors perspective in studies with lower-class people.

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