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Q3(c)

**Suggest measures to minimize the influence of the researchers in process of collecting data through focus group discussion.**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

**Core demand of the question**

- Suggest measures to minimize the influence of the researchers in process of collecting data through focus group discussion
- Keep the answer within a 20-mark length

**Revision summary**

Focus groups are easy to steer toward the researcher's thesis.

**Merton's** focused interview asks for open focus on the stimulus, not on the moderator's summary.

Recruitment, seating, silence, recording, and a second moderator reduce steering.

SHG and gig-worker groups show how patrons and experts can capture the floor.

Influence is minimised and named, not claimed to be zero.

**Introduction**

A focus group is a moderated conversation among a small set of participants on a defined topic. Robert **Merton's** focused interview already warned that the researcher can produce the very opinions she hopes to find. The task is to reduce that influence without pretending the moderator is invisible.

**Body****Design before the room**

- Write a topic guide of open prompts, not a quiz of the researcher's thesis.
- Recruit a relatively homogeneous group for the theme, as in an **SHG circle** or a shift of gig riders, so status fear of a mixed elite does not silence talk.
- Avoid stacking the room with clients who owe the NGO or the firm that hired the researcher.

**Moderator conduct**

- **Start with ground rules:** no right answer, talk to one another, disagreement is allowed.
- Use a co-moderator or observer to note who speaks and who is shut out.
- Delay the researcher's pet distinction. **Merton** asked for a focus on the stimulus, not on the interviewer's clever summary.
- **Ann Oakley's lesson on interviews applies:** do not perform as a distant machine, but do not convert the group into a classroom with the researcher as teacher.

- Watch leading probes, head-nodding only at favoured lines, and the urge to fill silence with a theory.

### Group process

- Seat people in a circle. Give quieter members a later round without putting them on trial.
- Limit the expert or office-bearer who can turn an SHG discussion into a patron's speech.
- Record with consent so later coding can check whether a theme was the moderator's phrase.

### After the talk

- Reflexive notes on the researcher's interventions, as **Harding's** strong objectivity would demand.
- Triangulate with observation, documents, or a second group run by another moderator.
- Do not treat the first colourful quote as the finding.

### What cannot be zero

- The researcher chose the topic, the venue, and the language. Influence is minimised, not deleted.
- In caste- and gender-mixed Indian settings, a male outsider moderator can still organise the floor; matching moderator gender and language is a practical control.

### Flow diagram

Focus group -> Open guide  
Focus group -> Restrained moderator  
Focus group -> Record and reflexivity  
Open guide -> Less researcher steering  
Restrained moderator -> Less researcher steering  
Record and reflexivity -> Less researcher steering

### Conclusion

Minimise researcher influence in focus groups by a non-leading guide, careful recruitment, restrained moderation, recording, reflexivity, and a second group or method. **Merton's** focused interview and feminist caution on interviewer power are the teaching tools. Zero influence is a false target; accountable influence is the real one.

### Facts & figures

#### Merton

The focused interview and later focus-group practice warned against imposing the investigator's frame.

#### Oakley

Showed that interviewer style is a social relation; the same holds for a group moderator.

#### Harding

Strong objectivity: record the researcher's location and moves instead of hiding them.

**SHG circle**

A typical Indian focus-group setting where an NGO facilitator can easily produce expected empowerment talk.

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