Focus Group Strategies in Community Development

Bennett Alexander (Cape Peninsula University of Technology) and
Mikko Korpela (University of Eastern Finland and Cape Peninsula University of
Technology)

Abstract

This paper presents a critical perspective on managing focus group sessions (FGSs) that are focussed on pertinent development issues within socially disadvantaged communities; and particularly investigates the role of the interpreter in facilitating a discourse which extensively takes place outside the usual socio-cultural domain of the researcher.

The experiences around a series of FGSs are reported which were conducted as part of a broader ICT4D environmental assessment study that took place in the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape as part of an ICT4D environmental assessment study. The paper explores, in particular, the perceived non-reporting of information in the interpreter-to-participants exchanges (IPE) versus researcher-to-interpreter exchanges (RIE) – on the basis of observed imbalances in the IPE and RIE dynamics. This paper consequently focuses on the socio-cultural and power relationships that may manifest within sessions and potentially compromise the effective gathering of data and information against the defined agenda of the researcher. The best traditions of qualitative research recognise the notion of shared control of the research experience (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Grudens-Schuck et al., 2004); and the community should therefore be able to direct the fore-grounding of their own agenda - if such exists in contrast to that of the researcher. This sets the scene for a power struggle within the FGS, and it is in this regard, that it is proposed that the interpreter could play an important role.

Jojola (2000) warns that development is not charity; and communities-in-development should be the enablers of their own destiny; and external development participation in the communities should be based on principled and strategic approaches.

This paper supports the views of Grudens-Schuck et al. (2004) that FGSs can produce high quality data and information if correctly structured; and argues that a critical approach is indicated to navigate the process through the challenges of the socio-cultural divide. Furthermore, the researcher has to be conscientious of the character, capacity and the underlying power dynamics in the community that produces the experiences observed during the FGSs.

Introduction

The paper is based on a case study of the Is'baya organisation and communities and their Integrated Village Renewal Programme (IVRP) which is set within the rural villages of the Transkei in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The target communities would be considered to be socially disadvantaged by most measures. The IVRP is a comprehensive implementation strategy for supporting the development of traditional small farming enterprises (TSFE) within a rural environment. The objectives of the IVRP are to ensure that households that are dependent for their livelihoods on TSFE are empowered to achieve food security on a sustainable basis; and to support and develop TSFE farmers to make the transition from subsistence farming to commercial production – by providing them with agricultural, ICT and other technical support.

The IVRP has been developed by a consortium of - development organisations, universities, and specialists. The IVRP features several strategic imperatives that are indicative of the integration aspect of the programme, namely – (1) community-centred programme management of the IVRP supported by central IVRP project management, (2) agriculture production, (3) community health, (4) heritage and indigenous knowledge, (5) trade and business development, and (6) ICT4D.

This study is situated within a broader ICT4D environmental assessment study which was directed at building understanding of the socio-environmental conditions that inform ICT deployment strategies and the choice of appropriate ICT technologies, and explain the ICT adoption phenomenon – in communities where ICT technologies are not commonplace; and further sought to build an understanding of the socio-techno-

economic dynamics within TSFE around ICT deployment that inform production enterprise performance.

The principal right of access to the communities was the promise of contribution - by the broader study, to the understanding of the appropriate strategies and technologies to support the expansion of programmes to realise commercialisation strategies of the production enterprise over-and-above the current subsistence-level engagements; and the research promised to offer insights into the drivers of ICT4D success; and provide elucidation of the associations and interactions around the induction of technology into a socio-political setting, that is – the induction of ICT into rural communities, and the adoption of said technology.

The Problem Situation

The problem of this study is to ascertain under what conditions FGSs could deliver reliable data in an environment where the researcher is operating in a cross-cultural context and the internal politics of the target community is unclear.

A FGS in qualitative research is a structured or semi-structured group interview in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions about specific issues. According to Grudens-Schuck *et al* (2004), FGS can produce quality data when employed for the right purposes and using the correct procedures.

A landscape model is presented that explores the general relationship between researcher and interpreter and participants in developing understanding of the socio-political-economic environment and aspirations of the community; the challenges of bridging the cultural divide and the embedded socio-cultural biases of the researcher is explored; the intra-group dynamics of the participants representing the case of the community is explored; the apparent (or observed) manifestation of the internal identity and an occasional altered external identity of a socially disadvantaged community is explored; and finally - a proposal for a higher functioning interpreter is presented.

At a practical level, the paper presents a technique - which the interpreter in this study light-heartedly referred to as *ukukhetha umdlungu emboneni* [an isiXhosa phrase,

meaning – separating the wheat from the chaff], which evolved during the course of the field sessions when the groups could not reach consensus on what was perceived to be difficult or uncomfortable issues to be clarified; ...but clarified for whom?

This paper, as introduced above, is organised into seven content areas, namely – (1) the context of the study, (2) an outline of critical theory, (3) a landscape for FGSs in community development, (4) the researcher and the cross-cultural divide in FGSs, (5) intra-group dynamics of participants within FGSs, (6) the question of altered external identities of socially disadvantaged communities, (7) proposal for a higher functioning interpreter in FGSs, and (8) the *Ukukhetha* technique for dealing with FGS impasses.

Context

A critical perspective on managing FGSs that are focussed on pertinent development issues within socially disadvantaged communities is presented here; and particularly investigates the role of the interpreter in facilitating a discourse which extensively takes place outside the usual socio-cultural domain (or comfort zone) of the researcher.

The experiences around a series of FGSs that took place in the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape of South Africa, as part of an ICT4D environmental assessment study are reported; and explores, in particular, the perceived *non-reporting* of information in the interpreter-to-participants exchanges (IPE) versus researcher-to-interpreter exchanges (RIE) – on the basis of observed imbalances in the IPE and RIE dynamics. This paper consequently focuses on the socio-cultural and power relationships that may manifest within sessions and potentially compromise the effective gathering of data and information against the defined agenda of the researcher; whereas the best traditions of qualitative research recognise the notion of shared control of the research experience (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Grudens-Schuck *et al*, 2004); and the community should therefore be able to direct the fore-grounding of their own agenda - if such exists in contrast to that of the researcher; which sets the scene for a power struggle within the FGS, and it is in this regard, that it is proposed that the interpreter could play an important role.

The use of FGSs for qualitative data gathering has become increasingly popular because of its perceived time-efficiency and cost-effectiveness; but there are also potential methodological difficulties related to applying FGSs within cross-cultural contexts (Yelland & Gifford, 1995). This sentiment is echoed by Strickland (1999) who urges that the researcher needs to be aware of traditions, communication protocols, roles and relationships when conducting FGSs within cross-cultural settings. The literature is abound with procedural templates for conducting FGSs, but there is only limited critical treatment of the FGS as a viable qualitative data gathering method within socially disadvantaged communities where the researcher operates within a cross-cultural context – as was the case within the broader research environment of this study. This paper presents a strategy for bolstering researcher confidence in the veracity of data gathered in FGSs and reduces the potential risk of the credibility and confirmability of the data being compromised through misinterpretation of exchanges that take place within the FGS.

The recommended procedures for conducting focus group sessions are well represented in the literature (Yin, 2003; Lamont & Small, 2008; Kumar 1987); and indeed much of the suggested mechanisms are also deployed within this study, such as – drafting the agenda, identifying and recruiting participants, selecting the venue and setting, conducting the sessions with ground rules and protocol duly observed, and recording and analysis.

Critical Theory

This study demands a critical lens for the gathering and analysis of qualitative data. Critical theory deals with the phenomenon of power relations within social settings that is premised on the notion of *hegemony* – which recognises "a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression" in order to maintain the *status quo* (McLaren, 1998).

The critical theoretical perspective that underpins this study is derived mainly from Gall *et al* (1999) who propose a strategy for engendering a critical perspective that provides

a coherent framework for the contextualization, critique and analysis of social experience. They propose the application of *seven basic assumptions* that acknowledges the prevalence of specific social relational dynamics with and within the target community, namely – (1) the manifestation of privilege and oppression or non-privilege; (2) the potentially multifaceted nature of oppression; (3) the role of language in establishing awareness; (4) the biased inscription of experience into discourse; (5) the mediation of individual perspectives through social and historical power relations; (6) the ideological inscription of truth; and (7) the problem of instrumental rationality.

Each of the aforementioned assumptions of criticality will now be considered in relation to data gathering and analysis practice within FGSs to ensure that such practices are consistent with the broad traditions of critical theory. In the context of the FGS of this study, critical theory informs the engagement process towards uncovering the *bona fide* conditions and aspirations of individuals and the community.

The prevailing socio-political conditions or landscape needs to be understood with regards to the power relations that define privilege and oppression. Critical theory "seeks to disclose the true interests of groups and individuals", and promote the emancipation of the oppressed or non-privileged (Gall *et al*, 1999). It is therefore of paramount importance for FGS that a context be created where non-privileged groups have freedom to give expression to their aspirations and potential to engage opportunities.

The next consideration in engendering criticality in the FGS engagement strategy towards understanding the prevailing socio-political conditions, relates to the potentially multifaceted nature of oppression – which demands that the researcher be vigilant in exploring any potential manifestation of oppression and its relation to other (more dominant) forms of oppression. The ability to effectively combat oppression is contingent on having comprehensive understanding of these conditions.

Language is generally key to the formulation of awareness, but even more so in a cross-cultural environment. Different forms of discourse – which are formally and informally established, are involved in shaping the conscious and unconscious

experiences and consequently the awareness of individuals and the community; and language usage or "voice" of the discourse often is an expression of dominance or oppression (Gall *et al*, 1999). Submissions of individual and community perspectives during FGS could therefore contain more than just mere literal content, and it imperative that the researcher (and/or translator / interpreter) should be sensitive to nuances in language usage to potentially uncover a broader formulation of what is being conveyed.

The inscription of experience into discourse is biased by context and perspective - where the actors within the discourse will ascribe meaning based on their own distinctive worldviews. Critical theory proposes that the discourse has no definite meaning and could yield multiple, even contradictory interpretations. It is therefore incumbent on the researcher within the FGS (and generally) to deconstruct the discourse and extract value with due consideration of the influences of hegemony, popular culture, and other aspects – including those referred to above.

"All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted" (Gall *et al*, 1999). In the context of this study, this assumption implies that the beliefs and perspectives of participants as communicated in FGS are affected by their experiences with power relations – both outside and within the FGS; and that it is fundamental to who they are. The researcher should be aware that there are inherent social and historical biases that probably will persist despite attempts at structuring a social environment for the FGS that appears to be conducive to open exchange.

The critical theoretical assumption relating to the *ideological inscription of truth* refers to the notions – that the pursuit of truth within qualitative research is value-referenced and not value-free; and that extant systems invariably favour the endeavours of the privileged or dominant groups over the non-privileged or oppressed groups. A critical approach when conducting social inquiry within FGS therefore attempts to level the playing field by promoting the emancipation of the non-privileged.

Critical theory highlights the problem of instrumental rationality and cautions against the over-emphasis of technological determinism (the means) over the outcomes of social

intervention (the ends). It is important within the FGS that the researcher does not overly promote a particular agenda, but rather remain open to the aspirations of the community and the emancipation of the non-privileged.

A Landscape for FGSs in Community Development

The landscape model presented here is based almost entirely on observations in the field. The FGS is able to forge a summary view of the perspective of a community - from the melting pot of differing individual perspectives - in a manner that is not easily attainable with other forms of survey; but this, we believe, is possible only under properly managed circumstances.

The community perspective on a particular issue need not always reflect a consensus view; but the general orientation of the community to that issue must be clearly articulated – which may even reflect that the community has a disparate orientation to the particular issue or aspects of it.

It is important to note that the focus group setting is not the proper environment for recording individual submissions (Grudens-Schuck *et al*, 2004) – as one might be tempted to do from time to time – as when prominent community leadership figures are present in the session; because political motives and undercurrents around submissions are not easily detected (or at best – unclear) within the high pressure environment of the FGS. It is equally important that a strong uncontested submission not be construed as the collective perspective even if one or more other persons confirm that particular point of view; all perspectives must be subjected to rigorous in-session testing and thoughtful discussion to ensure that it best captures the community view, in terms of - scope, complexity, (multi-sectoral) representivity, mood, intent, and more.

The FGS landscape presented here will investigate – (1) researcher- interpreter dynamics; (2) FGS dynamics; (3) focus group dynamics; and (4) community dynamics; as is illustrated in the figure below:
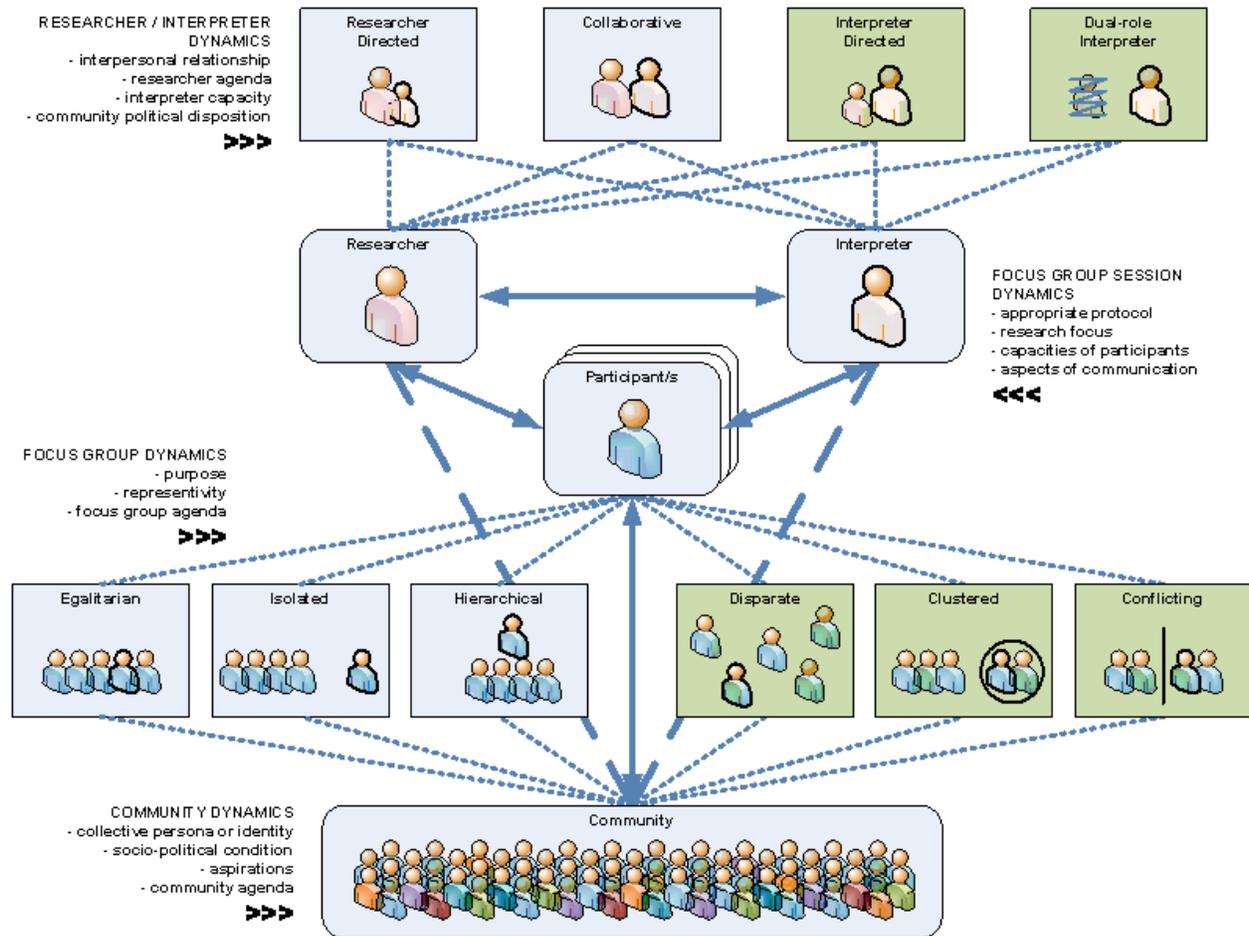
Figure : FGS Landscape

The researcher has to validate the data and preferably use some form of qualitative triangulation of the data presented in FGSs to attain the reasonable levels of comfort with it; and this typically would take the form of engaging community members in one-on-one interviews where the prevailing political environment is less imposing and to also incorporate the experiences and insights gained through personal exposure to the environment.

The role of the interpreter is of specific interest in this study because the interpreter (of this study) is also a community developer and has a vested interest in presenting the case of the community and was not simply a neutral functionary; and the role of the interpreter is of general interest because suitably qualified interpreters as the *go*

betweens the community and the world external to the community probably would have some connectedness to the socio-cultural conditions and aspirations of the community – so there typically would be no neutral interpreters.

The research-interpreter dynamics are governed by several considerations; it is first of all an interpersonal relationship which is subject to the basic values of interpersonal communication, such as – respect and trust; but at a functional level it is governed, amongst other considerations, by – the agenda of the researcher, the competency of the interpreter, and as will be argued in the paper - the general political disposition of the community.

The FGS dynamics are essentially defined by the three-way exchange that takes place researcher, interpreter, and participants. It is crucial that this dynamic be managed in a considered manner as directed by the extant literature, recognising – (1) adherence to contextually or culturally appropriate protocol; (2) the binding imperative to pursue the research focus; (3) the varying political and cognitive capacities of participants; and (4) the art of communication where, over and above the verbal submissions; there could be hidden information in the audience demeanour, the body language of the participant, and even the unsaid.

The focus group dynamics are the internal organisational power relations that manifests within participant groups and this could take many different forms, such as – *the egalitarian grouping* which is characterised by – open and democratic approaches to make their case and resolve potential internal issues and is indicative of communities having incorporated a degree of modernity into their *modus operandi*; *the hierarchical grouping* where there is an uncontested spokesperson which is indicative of traditional communities; *clustered groupings* where there are clear manifestation of separate agendas; *conflicting groupings* where there are manifestation of contrary agendas being supported by the separate groupings; the *disparate grouping* where there seems to be no common ground or agenda; and then there is also the *isolated or discrete view* which needs to be accommodated.

The understanding of community dynamics is important for the researcher to establish a realistic scenario of the perceptions and aspirations of the community – so that sensible interventions through development programmes could be instituted.

The notion of community however is a complex construct which seeks to interpret and/or place identity on a group of connected individuals, in terms of their – geographical location; social condition; cultural orientation – which remains a vague concept to me; and other considerations; which together creates a collective *persona* or identity of the community (Nimni, 2008).

When addressing a FGS (or any gathering), we relate in our own minds to this collective persona or identity as opposed to simply directing our address to discrete individuals or receiving submissions from them – in order for us to have sensible exchange. It is not the purpose of this study to elucidate in any academic form the phenomenon or *collective persona* that is referred to here; but will explore this further in this paper.

The Researcher and the Cross-cultural Divide within FGS

The notion of a cross-cultural divide is an interesting one, since the notion of culture is not universally defined; and some would argue – misunderstood and misused (Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, http://www.roshan-institute.org); but appears at least in the modern (and perhaps non-anthropological) sense to refer to – language and communication styles; approaches to art and the sciences; ontology – the way the world is perceived; spirituality – or individual and collective expressions of the connections between the inner beings of individuals and a greater consciousness or deity; shared social customs, such as – rituals and celebrations; and interaction – the protocol or conventions for how human interaction should take place. Notwithstanding the separation of language, it is on the basis of the latter point – that of shared social customs, that we wish to explore the cross cultural experience of a researcher coming into an environment of defined culture which is extensively different from the usual socio-cultural setting (or comfort zone) of the researcher.

At a pragmatic level, it is important just not to act in any way that the community might find offensive; and it would do no harm to demonstrate some token gesture of respect

for customs and practice, which might be to greet the gathering in their mother tongue; and to be observant and tactful about – allocating floor time and interrupting speakers, using silence and non-verbal expression as communicative devices; knowing what would be appropriate topics of conversation; and the use of humour and laughter as a communicative device (Taylor, 1990).

There will be some risk of the data and information being misconstrued within a qualitative data gathering process where the researcher is not adequately orientated to the cross cultural context of the FGS. If the researcher is unfamiliar with the socio-political environment and every aspect appears to be novel, there may be a tendency to over-simplify or over-complicate the data capturing in an attempt to – rationalise and comprehensively represent the situation (respectively); with experience it becomes easier to lift out the salient aspects that warrants treatment within the environment.

When dealing with socially disadvantaged communities, the solution sometimes appears to be apparent for an outsider who derives from a more affluent background; and such paternalistic approaches would not only be misinformed but also be completely inappropriate. Socially disadvantage communities are complex societies that have to contend with a myriad of issues on an ongoing basis – many of which would are simply insurmountable given the resource base of the community (Planning Commission of India, http://planningcommission.nic.in). Jojola (2000) warns that development is not charity; and communities-in-development should be the enablers of their own destiny; and external development participation in the communities should be based on principled and strategic approaches.

Not all participants within a FGS have the same capacity to engage the discourse. At one level it seems to be a statement of the obvious, while at another level – it might be read as provocative, even contentious! The point that we want to make is that a researcher should not treat participants in a FGS as a homogenous group. The study accesses a perceived collective persona or identity of the community; and is interested in the collective perspective of the community; but individual participant submission and/or competencies should not be considered to be representative of the whole – (herewith) extending the collective persona debate of the previous section.

Intra-group Dynamics of Participants within FGS

As illustrated in the FGS Landscape model and discussed above, focus groups could be quite varied in their structural make-up. The management and leadership literature abounds with analyses of group dynamics and the principles of constituting effective groups (Benard, 2007; Marr, 2001) – this is not the purpose of raising the intra-group dynamics debate here. The point that needs to be made is that the FGS is not the only game in town! The discourse that plays out during a FGS is just a window into the life of the community where often complex and long-standing struggles are waged around many different aspects of community life.

The FGS Landscape model references the notion of the community political disposition. The rural communities of the former Transkei region of the Eastern Cape are generally politically aware; communities have defined perspectives about their traditional, local, and provincial government – and are often quite critical of the quality of the service delivery that emanate from these structures; and there often is a pronounced tradition of community activism and political party association. Communities typically have been subjected to many development organisations to varying degrees of success. The extent of community politicisation of course varies from community to community; it is however important for the researcher to gain prior knowledge of the specific context of the communities that will be accessed.

Given the complexity of the socio-political environment, it is therefore recommended that the group dynamics that present within a FGS should be accommodated as opposed to attempting to simplistically *correct* it; participation is on a voluntary basis; and all contributions are respected and duly noted – and this should be declared at the outset as part of the ground rules for engagement. It is however the contention of this paper that the interpreter could play an important role in managing potentially volatile FGSs where the political tensions in the community would be difficult to be understood or to be contained by an outsider; and where there is some risk of the FGS collapsing and not yielding constructive data and information. The role of the interpreter who is

entrenched in the affairs of the community could be invaluable to mitigate the risk of premature dissolution of the FGS.

Altered External Identities of Socially Disadvantaged Communities?

In this section, we report - without attempting to provide coherent academic articulation, on a phenomenon that we have observed on occasion during our engagement of communities, that communities would present on initial engagement of an external party, either a distinctly more pessimistic scenario or a distinctly more optimistic scenario of their social condition – relative to what we would regard as the *bona fide* social condition of the community which would come to the fore after spending time with the community – interacting with individuals and learning first hand of their plight.

It is understood that in the time typically available to present a case, that not everything can be said and only the key issues are prioritised and therefore might be somewhat overstated or perceived to be overstated). Socially disadvantaged communities are continuously operating in survival mode, and it is therefore understandable that when the opportunity presents, that members of the community would want to present their case in a manner that would secure the most support – which would explain the occasional presentation of an overly pessimistic view of their social condition.

So, why is the case of the community occasionally presented in an overly optimistic way? The only logic that we could muster in this regard, is to equate this anecdotally to when a new acquaintance is invited into the privacy of your home and you would try to show off your home in the best possible light! In this section, we too, may even have somewhat overstated the socio-psychological phenomenon of an occasional altered external identity of communities for strategic purposes; but as Jojola (2000) succinctly declares - communities-in-development have no need to explain their condition to themselves!

There is however precedent to this phenomenon as reported by Bailur (2007), who suggests that the notion of community participation in rural information systems projects is "far more complex and contradictory" than what ICT4D literature in general leads us to understand. Bailur (2007) reports on the experiences around the *Our Voices Radio*

and telecentre in India, and illuminates on the challenges faced in achieving community participation and contextual appropriateness of the *Our Voices Radio* and telecentre rural development project as a result of a misalignment of purpose between - the funding agency, the project management, and the community; and argues that open participation is often operationally thwarted by implementing rigid organisational structures and pursuing predefined missions - which could present barriers to access by the community. Bailur (2007) further reports on the so-called "co-optation" phenomena where "local communities tell project implementers what they want to hear" – perhaps because of the skewed social power relationships and/or traditions dictating that local people do not offend outsiders; the lack of open community participation could then possibly militate against achieving contextual appropriateness in the design of the project.

The ultimate point that needs to be made is that researchers should not simply regard all submissions as being valid; there is always a need to ratify information.

Proposal for a Higher Functioning Interpreter in FGS

The primary role of the interpreter in a FGS is to partner the researcher in managing the session through its various stages, which typically involves - (1) an ice-breaker; (2) introduction of the panel; (3) recognising of any VIPs present; (4) providing information to participants; (5) hearing the initial reply from participants; (6) engaging in the participants in the structured FGS process; and (7) concluding the process by summarising and providing details of further processes.

As mentioned with respect to intra-group dynamics, particular groupings of participants may present in the FGS as a direct consequence of prevailing socio-political conditions in the community. It is understood that within any FGS issues might arise on the day that may require clarification and may involve some decision making which typically is the domain of the researcher. It is however in regard of issues that have some deep rootedness in the socio-politics of the community that the researcher may not be adequately qualified to deal with during the FGS. This is where the proposal for a higher functioning interpreter comes into being.

Focus Group Strategies in Community Development
August 30, 2010

In order to effectively manage the FGS in a politically loaded environment, decisions need to be taken on the fly in respect of many aspects, including – demographic gender and generational balances; the balance of political orientations and agendas; and prevalence of possible power and dominance or conflict dynamics – and this is where a higher functioning interpreter could be very useful. An interpreter who understands the community is able to - moderate isolated or minority views, find common ground in the modernity versus traditional approaches debate – as typically evidenced in the egalitarian and hierarchical groupings, and may be able to understand the issues of the social breakdown that results in the manifestation of disparate groupings, and would have some basis for moderating in the more serious politically clustered or conflicting groupings.

The researcher-interpreter relationship is central to capacitating the interpreter to perform a broader function than is probably the norm for interpreters. As mentioned before, the researcher-interpreter relationship needs to be healthy at an interpersonal level, but also the researcher needs to communicate clearly the research agenda to the interpreter prior to the FGS, and the interpreter needs to inform the researcher of the prevailing socio-political disposition of the community prior to the FGS. The researcher has to ensure that the interpreter is knowledgeable or trained in conducting FGSs, and if all the aforementioned conditions are met then researcher and interpreter could settle on an appropriate strategy for a forthcoming FGS, which could be conducted in several configurations, which in order of escalating responsibility and competence demanded of the interpreter, would be – (1) a researcher-directed FGS, (2) a collaboratively managed FGS, (3) an interpreter-directed FGS, or (4) an FGS where the interpreter performs the dual-role of acting-researcher in data gathering and interpreter in providing the data feedback to the researcher. The latter strategy has not been tested in practice and is presented here merely as the ultimate extension of the role of the interpreter; and would logically be deployed only in exceptional circumstances where any form of outside participation could be construed as interference. The first three strategies have all been tested in practice and also represent in sequence the emancipation of the interpreter

Page
16

through training and experience – which in a complementary manner would also release the researcher to focus on the non-verbal aspects of the exchanges within the FGS.

All having been said, the researcher-directed FGS will continue to be the dominant configuration; on the basis of what is presented here. The collaborative management of the FGS is clearly a desirable option, since this would allow the interpreter to act semi-autonomously to manage the flow of the discourse and provide regular précis of the discourse to the researcher; while the researcher, on the basis of the précis, maintains the research focus of the FGS, observes the non-verbal aspects of exchanges and synthesises the collective perspective of the community on the matters under discussion. The interpreter-directed FGS is a minority option that could be deployed in politically loaded FGS – as mentioned before.

The *Ukukhetha* Technique for Dealing with FGS Impasses

The *ukukhetha* technique presented here is a suite of *simple tricks* deployed to deal with impasses (or deadlocks) that occurs in the FGS from time to time – when participants are perhaps unable to qualify a particular statement that was made; or when no response is elicited to a question posed to the FGS; or when there is a difference of opinion that needs to be resolved.

The strategies that were deployed were –

(1) Using a top-down (macro-to-micro) strategy when dealing with cognitively challenging matters where the difficulty presents at the micro level, e.g. – in trying to clarify the philosophical position of a participant, it may be easier to ask about the general philosophical orientation within traditional culture – the big picture, and then request the personal philosophical position of the participant to a particular topic of discussion,

(2) As the converse of the statement above – use a bottom-up (micro-to-macro) strategy when dealing with conceptually complex matters where the difficulty presents at the macro level, e.g. – in trying to explain the design of a local area network, it may be sensible to start explaining about the connectivity at the community level, then village level, etc.

(3) Proactively suggest a position relative to a question and ask for comment, as opposed to simply asking participants to synthesise a position from scratch. Occasionally, and probably more frequently towards the conclusion of the session, summarise and ask for participants to approve, reject, or comment – so that your assumptions are tested and a common understanding is iteratively evolved,

(4) when it not possible for participants to comfortably or clearly articulate their value judgement on a complex issues, then it often helps to provide multiple choice (quantitative) options, such as – (a) asking for clarification by presenting a polarised scenario to garner a sense of orientation, that is – testing the extremes (or minima and maxima) of situations; (b) asking participants to commit to binary type responses of – *yes* or *no*, or *true* or *false*, or *more* or *less*, and no *maybes*, in an attempt to remove ambiguity; (c) asking participants to rate their position on a scale, that is – to rate their perceptions or experience on a scale of (say) *1* to *10* or to commit to a percentage acceptance rating of situations presented; (d) asking participants to determine the rank order of their position in a direct comparison of options provided; and

(5) Asking participants to dissect and evaluate the components of the proposition and to declare – what should be left out, what aspects they approve of, and what aspects they reject.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presented argument for a critical approach to FGSs to bolster researcher confidence in the veracity of data gathered within the FGS – by being aware of the potential risk to the credibility and confirmability of the data being compromised through misinterpretation of exchanges that take place within the FGS based on the respective roles of the researcher and interpreter and their interaction with the community on the basis of – the researcher functioning within a cross-cultural divide, the intra-group dynamics of participants within FGSs, and the question of altered external identities of socially disadvantaged communities. The study proposes a strategy for a higher functioning interpreter within FGSs, and the *Ukukhetha* technique for dealing with FGS impasses.

Sen (1999) raises the notion of "development as freedom" – and presents the interdependence of two concepts; the veracity of data gathered - as discussed above, is one half of the concern; the other half being that all voices need to be heard, or as Sen suggests – to have the freedom to be heard within the development discourse.

The views of Grudens-Schuck et al. (2004) are therefore supported here - that FGSs can produce high quality data and information if correctly structured; and argues that a critical approach is indicated to navigate the process through the challenges of the socio-cultural divide; and the researcher has to be conscientious of the character, capacity and the underlying power dynamics in the community that produces the experiences observed during the FGSs.

References

Bailur, S. 2007. The complexities of community participation in ICT for development projects: The case of "Our Voices". Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries, São Paulo, 28-30 May 2007.

Benard, S. 2007. Intergroup conflict and intragroup dynamics. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cornell University, New York.

Gall, J. P., Gall, M. D. & Borg, W. R. 1999. Critical Research Theory, Applying Educational Research: A Practical Guide, Addison Wesley Longman, New York, 361-367.

Grudens-Schuck, N., Allen, B.L. & Larson, K. 2004. *Focus Group Fundamentals*. http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969b.pdf [11 June 2010].

Jojola, T. 2000. *Indigenous planning and community development*. http://ipdru.arts.unsw.edu.au/media/File/Jojola_-_turtleschoolcasestudy.pdf [11 June 2010].

Krueger, R.A, & Casey, M.A. 2000. *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.

Kumar, K. 1987. *Conducting group interviews in developing countries.* http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAX226.PDF [11 June 2010].

Lamont, M. & Small, M.L. 2008. *How culture matters for the understanding of poverty*. http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~mlamont/papers/HowCultureMatters.pdf [11 June 2010].

Marr, A. 2001. *Studying group dynamics*.
http://www.soas.ac.uk/economics/research/workingpapers/file28857.pdf [11 June 2010].

McLaren, P. 1998. Life in schools: an introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education. 3rd ed. New York: Longman, 182.

Nimni, E. 2008. *Collective dimensions of the right to take part in cultural live*.
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/discussion/EphraimNimni.pdf [11 May 2010].

Sen, A. 1999. *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strickland, C.J. 1999. *Conducting focus groups cross-culturally*.
http://courses.washington.edu/bh518/Articles/Conducting_Focus_Groups.pdf [22 June 2010].

Taylor, O. 1990. *Cross-cultural communication*. http://www.maec.org/pdf/taylor.pdf [11 June 2010].

Yelland, J. & Gifford, S.M. 1995. Problems of focus group methods in cross-cultural research: A case study of beliefs about sudden infant death syndrome. *Australian Journal of Public Health*, 19(3):257-263.

Yin, R.K. 2003. *Case study research: Design and methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.