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## Homogeneity of Focus Groups as a Pathway to Successful Research Findings? : Methodological Notes from the Fieldwork

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## Homogeneity of Focus Groups as a Pathway to Successful Research Findings? Methodological Notes from the Fieldwork

**Abstract** The paper approaches the topic of sampling in the qualitative research design. Particular attention is paid to the composition of the focus groups in two important aspects: the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their positions in socio-occupational hierarchy and the pre-existing relations among the participants in the single group. The latter issue is closely and directly intertwined with the former, in the case when the informants are approached in their institutional setting, and the research is conducted in a relatively small community. These problems are discussed in reference to the body of available methodological studies. The example of the research undertaken in aforementioned circumstances is subsequently presented to advocate the homogeneous composition of the focus groups while reconstructing the collective viewpoints of representatives of a particular level of public administrations. Avoidance of power relations within the groups proved profitable and effective. Substantial differences between the groups were easily identifiable in spite of the pre-existing relations among participants, which were unavoidable in this very case.

**Słowa kluczowe** Focus Groups; Group Interviewing; Methodology of Qualitative Research; Sampling; Homogeneity

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### Introductory Remarks<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 40s, thanks to Paul Lazarsfeld, founder of the Bureau of Applied Social Sciences (Barton 1979) and his most famous employee, Robert Merton, who is sometimes credited as the “father of Focus Group” (Kaufman 2003), group interviewing has been present in the methodological repertoire of social sciences. It has been firstly designed for the purposes of evaluative marketing research (also

<sup>1</sup> The author expresses deep gratitude to two anonymous reviewers whose comments and remarks enabled to introduction of indispensable corrections to the proposed paper.

concerning the efficiency of American war propaganda). Nowadays, it is also very often used as an instrument of research on political issues, in health-care research, or while projecting solutions in policy-making processes. During the following decades this kind of study has been hailed and criticized by various scholars involved in methodological debates over the qualitative paradigm of social research.

Since the 60s, social sciences have witnessed a substantial increase in number of research efforts conducted and published using the qualitative methodology at the expense of quantitative studies (Fielding 2010:132). Along with this processes, Focus Group Interviews (hereafter: FGI) have become increasingly popular and an established technique among researchers, to the joy of some scientists and disappointment of others. From the beginning of the 90s, the bookshelf with elaborations and studies concerning unique methodology and all possible aspects of this kind of interviewing is getting more and more rich (Madriz 2000:835-836).

FGI is a research technique that is based on a direct interaction among participants of a group discussion on the topic defined by the researcher (Morgan 1997; Krueger 1994). The interview is described as "focused," firstly, because it is concentrated on one crucial theme, and secondly, it demands some specific collective actions of the respondents. The latter feature distinguishes this research technique from individual interviews. Due to the effects of synergy and group dynamics, FGI provides the researcher with an insight into respondents' attitudes, their language codes, priority values, and cognitive schemes as they are constructed in a di-

rect and lively interaction. It also enables access to knowledge about opinions as they are formulated in a discursive manner during the exchange of ideas in the course of a group discussion (see: Kitzinger 2004; Kutsar, Strömpl, Trumm 2006; Daniłowicz and Lisek-Michalska 2007; Belzile and Öberg 2012).

Leaving aside interesting and stimulating discussions on various aspects of group interviews and usefulness of its applications in social sciences, this paper will concentrate instead on some elements of the research process which every scholar takes into account while planning his/her tasks. The process of selecting respondents and composing groups is important for the qualitative research. Precise design is essential for the quality and aptitude of the data gathered. In case of collective efforts like group interviewing improper composition of the sample could easily hamper the efforts. The procedure of purposeful sampling of specific informants, which is the core way for selecting the participants for qualitative inquiry, rarely allows the sampling with replacements, contrary to random sampling in a quantitative research which frequently uses substitutions.

Issues concerning homogeneity/heterogeneity of FG will be discussed in reference to other characteristics of this kind of research (effects of synergy, groupthink), as raised in the large body of previous research. Special attention will also be paid to the question of familiarity among the participants in the FG and the consequences coming from the nature of their pre-existing relations.

The particular study undertaken by the sociologists from University of Lodz will be used as an example

of the research where specific sampling and composition of group for FGI sessions lead to profitable and interesting results. The results of this case will be used only to exemplify the consequences of homogeneous composition of the FG as particularly beneficial in studies undertaken in organizations, where researchers are interested in studying institutional roles of participants. Homogeneity, in terms of belonging to the same level of management and similar work experiences, allows the reconstruction of the specific features of different levels of authority, increases group synergy, and strengthens the capacity for cooperation and confidence among the participants. This proved particularly important since in the circumstances of this inquiry it was impossible to design FG composed exclusively of people with no prior interrelations.

### Selecting Respondents for the FGI – Methodological Questions and Doubts

In most cases researchers point out the following features of the group as the specific social entity: direct communication, reciprocal influence, interaction, interdependence, mutual reactions, self-identification, structure, psychological meaning. The most important ones, while planning the FGI research, are the two remaining: *similarity of the members of the group*, which in case of meaning has at least one common characteristic and *common experience*. The latter one has two meanings: experience gained before the group was formed and “common fate” experienced by the participants during FGI session.

Sampling for the FGIs is always purposeful and theoretically motivated, determined by the topic

of the study (Morgan 1997:35). As qualitative research does not try to provide results which could be extrapolate for a wide population, researchers are able to imply “convenience sampling,” to use the phrase of Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:53). Instead of any kind of randomization, groups have to be homogeneous in reference to at least one characteristic, which is indispensable for the proper procedure of recruitment for the group session. The common variable may be connected with any kind of socio-demographic characteristic, as well as with the individual characteristic of the potential participants regarding the topic of the meeting (Bloor et al. 2002:21-22).

The common assumption that in order to achieve advantageous results the groups must be composed of total strangers is one of the myths describing qualitative interviewing. To the contrary, Bloor and colleagues prove that rarely there is a need for this kind of approach and avoiding the pre-existing relationships in FG research as a general rule is both unnecessary and improbable (2002:22). In this respect, he follows Kitzinger who claims: “[a]bove all, it is useful to work with pre-existing groups because they provide one of the social contexts within which ideas are formed and decisions made” (1994:105).

These issues should be carefully approached while planning the FGIs within the common institutional setting which increases not only the probability that the participants will know each other *ex ante* but also the likelihood that the power relations stemming from their positions in occupational and social hierarchy could influence the results of the

study. Methodologists have various doubts concerning the latter issue. On the one hand, they claim pre-existing relationships among participants could sometimes hamper the rule of the same conditions for each respondent and impede analysis of intersecting influences of the competing opinions and thoughts of the respondents expressed during particular discussion (Kitzinger 2004). On the other hand, it is particularly difficult to follow this rule when FGI are conducted among stakeholders – within a community of relatively small size. Besides, homogeneity of the focus groups allows the reconstruction of collective ways of thinking, or even formation of groupthink phenomenon over various topics, which could be treated as a particular strength of this kind of selection (Babbie 2004; Barbour and Schostak 2005:43).

Deborah Warr, discussing the doubts concerning pre-existing interrelations between the members of the group, states:

[f]ocus groups composed of participants who belong to pre-existing social groups can re-create aspects of their social relations as participants exchange opinions and engage in process of persuasion. This does not mean that focus groups represent naturalistic interactions from the life worlds of participants, but facilitating focus groups with people who are known to each other can generate interactions and discussions of “real-life” scenarios that are not entirely contrived (2005:201-202).

Warr was referring to her own research among people who not only knew each other privately and shared similar experiences but they have also originated from the homogeneous social and

economic background. These features allowed for more dense interactions between the participants during the FGI, including very frank and personal references to common past. The familiarity between them resulted in lively discussions where they have mutually challenged their opinions in a way inaccessible for the researcher – outsider – and the trust between them was more probable due to the homogeneous nature of their positions. Thus, FGIs could be selected from the qualitative inquiry toolbox when looking for the reconstruction of some common attitudes and consensual perceptions among the participants sharing some common ground, as well as in the research which aims at challenging their assumptions and stimulating “argumentative interactions” (Kitzinger 1994). Kitzinger also underlines the fact that the presence of the others who share common experiences and knowledge on the other participants encourages the exchange of more trustful thoughts than in the case of individual data gathering with separate respondents:

[n]ot only does safety in numbers make some people more likely to consent to participate in the research in the first place...but being with other people who share similar experiences encourages participants to express, clarify, or even develop particular perspectives. (1994:112)

There is also a longstanding controversy concerning homogeneity in reference to almost all potential variables (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990:42-43; Morgan 1997:37; Rabiee 2004:656). Whether women and men should be gathered together while discussing gender-sensitive topics? Whether the discussion, or even an argument between them,

allows the researcher to draw the line of distinction between the ways of thinking dominating in each category? Or, is it more effective to search for some patterns of thinking typical for each of them while interviewing each gender separately? Should we bring together representatives of various social strata representing social differentiation within a given population, or shall we rather comfort respondents allowing them to speak with people of similar backgrounds? It is particularly important to remember that the researcher is not always (or never is) able to recognize *ex ante* which topics could prove sensitive for the participants (Bloor et al. 2002:22). There are important and justified arguments for each of these positions, ranging from ethical (uncomfortable situations among participants) to strictly practical ones (unity in experiences and conformity of thoughts could diminish the intensity of the discussion and too differentiated group could lead to the chaos or conflicts during the session). Recruitment of participants via a pre-existing formal group could also be easier and more convenient due to reducing attrition rates.

According to other scholars, researchers can benefit from the homogeneous FG as they:

can scrutinize how the participants are developing certain themes in the discussion and how they are reflecting on and developing their understanding and anchoring of individual experience against the sum total of the other participants' arguments, experience, and knowledge. In the analysis, the researcher may explore how the elaboration of individual accounts helps in forming a web of socially shared knowledge emerging through group discussion. ... The group is a think-group, in which cognition is going on in

the minds of members, but this happens largely in and through the interaction. Individuals with some kind of common background stimulate each other to develop thoughts and arguments. In this process, ideas interpenetrate and often contradict each other...expressing disagreement may also be part of the learning process, as participants challenge each other, defend their arguments, and at times modify their viewpoints. (Wibeck, Abrandt Dahlgren, Öberg 2007:255-260)

It is especially fruitful when the research is concerned with the very specific dimension of the participants' lives, that is, their everyday work experiences. It could increase the effect of synergy and mutual stimulation for the discussants and their memories, and in most cases – it is not the whole range of multiple identities of respondents that we are interested in while pursuing qualitative research but rather some specific field onto which the respondent is active (Farnsworth and Boon 2010:609-610). Many focus groups are conducted within organizations or any kind of social bodies where recruiting the group of people who are not familiar with each other is simply impossible. The group dynamics during the session will certainly differ in cases where participants know each other, so this has to be taken into consideration by the researcher. However, a high level of acquaintanceship cannot be treated separately as a factor which definitely stimulates discussion or comforts the participants. Issues of trust among them are definitely more important, and open or unspoken dependency relations between the respondents, even those who know each other well, could substantially influence the quality of data gathered during FGIs.

The most important attribute of FGI, considered as one of the most important advantages of this technique is group dynamics, which could vary substantially, depending on the homogeneity and level of acquaintanceship of participants (see: Konecki 2000:185-187; Malinowski 2007:75-76). This relation is not always linear, though, for example, as it was noticed in one of the studies, in the case of mixed-gender groups, the level of conformity among participants was substantially lower and groups more effective than in the case of same-sex groups. If we take for granted that the situation of the interviews should be as close to the real-life situation as possible, than the presence of people who know each other becomes quite an evident advantage in comparison to meetings where a group of strangers is gathered. The outcome of research conducted within this kind of group could be endangered since common experiences and opinions among participants who share the same social position, occupational, and/or educational background could dishearten them from debating on certain issues. This may be caused by real, general agreements regarding the topic or unwillingness of participants to reveal their real thoughts to avoid confrontation with the rest of the group, especially if they have some interrelations with other respondents and the topic is sensitive.<sup>2</sup> In the case of focus groups which are homogeneous and the participants know each other in advance of the session, these issues should be taken into ac-

<sup>2</sup> One of the potential solutions that could be implemented in such a situation is introducing into the group a provocateur, collaborator of the researcher, who, by expressing intriguing statements, will attempt to stimulate discussion. This kind of technique was used in an interesting study on the tolerance among Polish students, conducted at the Warsaw University, which revealed the real anti-stranger prejudices and bias well-hidden under the facade of tolerant and politically correct statements (Lisek-Michalska 2007:57).

count *ex ante*, while planning the research, and *ex post* as the potential explanation for some specific attitudes, opinions, and behaviors presented by respondents during the session.<sup>3</sup>

## PROFIT Project – Background Information

This paper is not an attempt to adjudicate the controversies concerning the sampling procedures. Showing the example of particular research where homogeneous focus groups were conducted and purposeful sampling was applied, I wish to present:

- how the sampling was connected with the general conception of the study;
- what assumptions stood behind the specific composition of the focus groups;
- what results were obtained.

It is based on the research findings collected during the realization of the international project PROFIT,<sup>4</sup> which dealt with the issue of intergenerational

<sup>3</sup> In the case of the topics which are not sensitive (e.g., in marketing research), homogeneity in composition of groups increases the comfort of participants, stimulating more free-flowing discussions and allowing researchers to make more reliable and justified comparisons between data collected during diversified sessions. If the groups are more heterogeneous, the number of criteria which define the participants is smaller and therefore, it is advisable to conduct more group interviews to get a more detailed picture of the studied subject (Daniłowicz and Lisek-Michalska 2007:25).

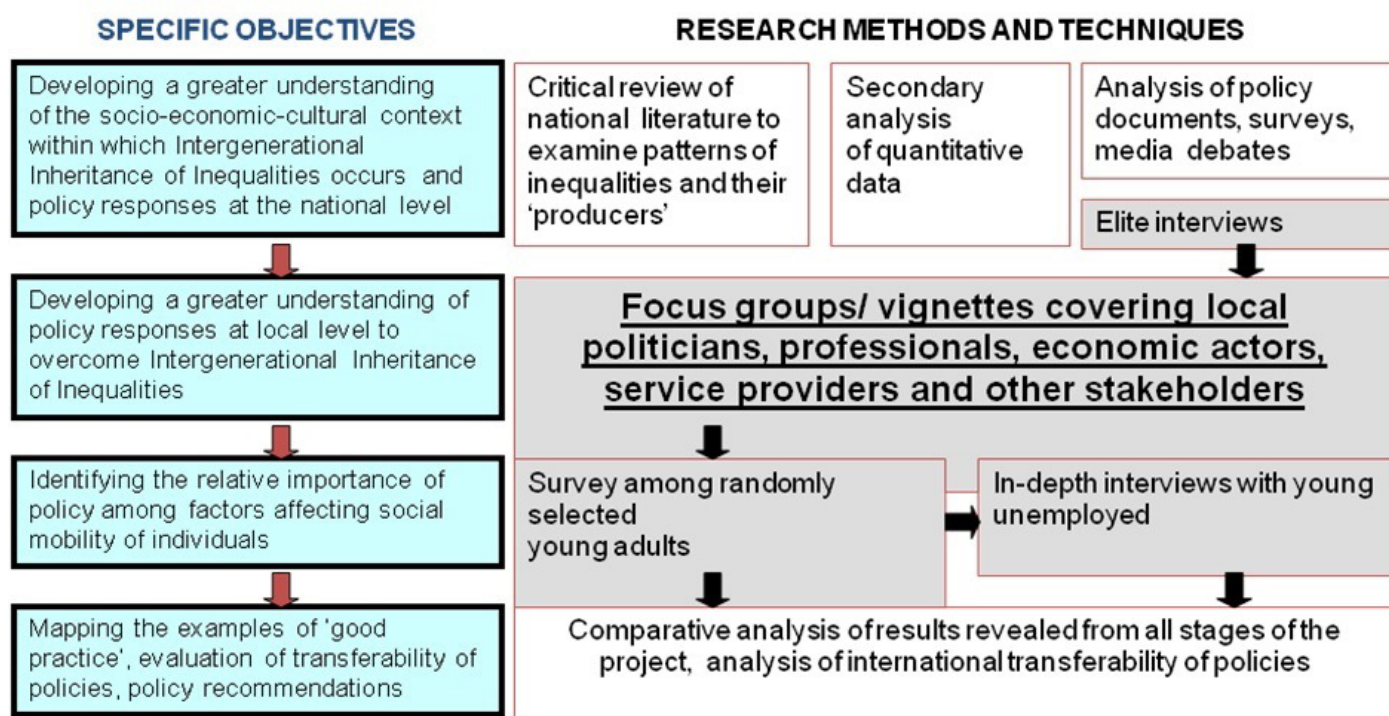
<sup>4</sup> PROFIT (*Policy Responses Overcoming Factors in the Intergenerational Transmission of Inequalities*) is financed by 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Program of European Commission under priority 7 – Citizens and governance in knowledge based society; contract no: CIT2-CT-2004-506245. It was coordinated by the University of Lodz and personally by Professor Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska. More information about the project, as well as reports and publications based on its outcomes could be found at: <http://www.profit.uni.lodz.pl/>.

inheritance of social inequalities. The study was multi-level and multi-method and the research team collected data at diverse levels, using various techniques (for more data about the project objec-

tives and methodology, see: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska and Rokicka (2007). A general outline of the project content and its phases is shown in the scheme below.

Figure 1. Methodological Scheme of PROFIT.

## Methodological scheme of PROFIT



Source: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska and Rokicka (2007:48).

PROFIT was a comparative research project providing deep, idiographic insight into various aspects of inequality reproduction, however, for the purposes of this sketchy paper, only small excerpts of the data collected will be presented.

As it is presented in the table above, FGIs were used in the project to study opinions, knowledge, and beliefs regarding the issue of inheritance of inequalities possessed by the local stakeholders from the purposely selected middle-sized town (50-80



thousands inhabitants, NUTS-4 level, using terminology of the EU), and the way in which these features determine the scope, extent, and efficiency of their actions aimed at counteracting social problems connected with intergenerational transmission of poverty and social inequalities. In this respect, PROFIT could be understood as a policy-oriented study and classified as “action research,” since not only the knowledge produced should be the final outcome of the project but also well-elaborated recommendations for the policy makers (Noffke, Somekh 2005). FGIs are quite frequently used in this kind of research. The justification for the selection of particular town is not connected with the topic of this paper (see: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska et al. 2006; Drabowicz 2007).

While planning the FGIs within a frame of the PROFIT project, discussions among the research team arose around how to operationalize the general aim of this stage of the project which was defined in the research proposal: *to combine two groups of respondents: those who formulate policy responses and those who implement them in everyday practice.*

This contextual analysis was intended to answer the following questions:

- How are problems of inheritance of inequalities and insecurity addressed through current local policies?
- At which groups (age, gender, ethnicity) are the policies aimed?
- Does the evidence show that policies work, and if not, how could they be changed?

- Who implements the policies to enhance employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship, and promote equal opportunities?
- What is the role of national policy in implementing local social inclusion practices?

The controversy among the members of the research team concerned the procedure of composing the focus groups. The first option was to create groups accordingly to the field of participants' activity. Researchers were mainly interested in three spheres of social policy: labor market policy, welfare policy, and educational policy. Therefore, it was relatively easy to compose groups consisting of people engaged in actions on a local level in each of these areas. The most important argument in favor of this solution, formulated during discussions, concerned the specificity of the local community within which the research was conducted. It was obvious that people involved in the process of policy-making from each level of local administration would surely know each other. On the one hand, it could be beneficial for the research topic to gather a group of specialists in some particular area and stimulate joint effort in order to collect data concerning their field of activity, yet, on the other hand, power and dependency relations inside the group, which could not be avoided in such a case, would be very serious constraints that could hamper realization of all research goals.

Low level of social trust in Poland and difficult situations on the labor market could easily discourage people from taking part in an open discussion in the presence of their superiors revealing their

attitudes and thoughts on the given topics, expressing their judgments on the quality of actions undertaken on various levels of administration, and also commenting decisions undertaken by those from a higher level of administration. Therefore, it was decided to include representatives of the same level of administration into each of the groups – to assure the feeling of safety among participants and encourage them to speak freely.

Four groups of informants were constructed, namely:

- “frontliners”: people who deal in everyday professional work with groups which are at risk of inheritance of poverty and low social status, or actually experience it: social workers, teachers, school educators, job agents, community nurses, et cetera;
- representatives of the third sector (charity, secular, and religious organizations, trade unions, employers’ organizations, etc.);
- representatives of managerial levels: heads of schools and local administration departments responsible for social policy and managers of other social service institutions, such as labor offices, et cetera;
- local politicians: members of the Town Council, representatives of political parties.

In other words, groups were homogeneous in terms of the type of activity (professional, volunteer) and the rank within occupational hierarchy. Invitation to participate in FGI research of the members

of the established social network could create the ground for common trust and understanding, allowing more in-depth investigation of the way the main theme of the research is both conceptualized by the informants, as well as approached by them in their everyday work. Since the pre-existing hierarchies can influence the relations inside of the groups and could be particularly crucial in the case of research conducted within the institutional setting, in a town where the distances and inequalities stemming from the position within the local community build the hierarchies important for the everyday life of participants, the decision was made to avoid any power relations or leaderships within the groups.

Every partner in this comparative research enterprise adopted the very same composition of the groups, but for the purpose of this paper – only the results of the Polish component will be presented.

## General Results of the Study

The participants of focus groups were considered experts in the subject and were asked to give their opinions. The scenario of the focus group interview was designed in such a way that the discussion among local stakeholders could provide information to answer the questions about the scope and size of the reproduction of inequality in the town under study, social groups/categories who are at risk of poverty inheritance, and actions undertaken by the local actors to counteract this phenomenon.

A moderating team facilitated all FGIs. The issue of moderation is another crucial aspect vividly dis-

cussed in methodological debates. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to discuss it in detail, but, generally, usage of the moderating team is a highly recommended procedure for both practical and substantial reasons (see for example: Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009:4). In the case of this research, the latter were crucial. The interviews have been conducted by Dr. Jolanta Lisek-Michalska, one of the most experienced researchers in the application of this technique and one of FGIs' most practiced moderators in Poland. She has not participated in the research project, but became involved into realization of this very stage due to her expertise and proficiency in applying group interviewing. The author of this paper, being a member of the core research team, served as an assistant moderator during each of the sessions. This procedure allowed combining the highest level of experience and ability of the facilitator with in-depth knowledge on the topic of discussions and expected results possessed by the assistant, which enabled intervention in a course of the interview when something particularly important was occurring.

At every session, participants were rather contributively discussing problems. The focus moderators managed to establish relations of mutual trust and confidence within the group, which encouraged the interviewees to express their opinions openly and frankly. Interviewees were referring to both their professional and personal experiences.

Most participants knew one another already; thus, they sometimes referred to common experiences. They recognized themselves well in their professional roles, knowledge about private encounters

and informal relations pre-existing prior to the meetings were inaccessible to the researchers. Homogeneity allowed researchers to identify certain features emblematic for the specific work ethos and way of thinking in each of these professional groups covering specific conscientious convictions, as well as unspoken stereotypes, language codes, and clichés. Thanks to the effect of group synergy some elements typical for the groupthink, as described by Irving L. Janis (1982), were also found during analysis of the transcripts, some of which will be presented separately for each of the FG.

Hardly ever did a controversy occur among the interlocutors, with an exception of the group of councilors whose discussion clearly reflected political divisions and conflicts. These "argumentative interactions" and differences in opinions plainly corresponded to ideological conflicts at the central level of the national politics. For the other groups, the experiences of the participants have not lead to significant controversies, and while confronted with the need to resolve a problem (via the usage of vignette technique), the need for consensus was clearly visible within each of the groups; hence, the differences between them were easily noticeable.

Opting for four homogeneous groups allowed the avoidance of the relations of hierarchical dependency among the interviewees during sessions, and to encourage full and frank exchange of information. Despite the standardization of the interview, the content and subject matters discussed varied considerably from session to session, testifying to diverse attitudes, opinions, and experiences of particular focus groups. On the other hand,

the groups were not differing in terms of group dynamics. The detailed interaction analysis beyond is the scope of the paper, but no significant differences have been observed during detailed analysis of tapes and scripts from every FG conducted. Homogeneity and pre-existing relations between participants contributed to the reduction of stress and anxiety of the people under study. The phase of ice breaking lasted for a short time and mostly served to increase trust and understanding among the participants when it comes to the rationale behind the research and confidentiality of the data. Each FGI took over two hours. Interviews were video- and tape-recorded by participants' consent. A summary of the results of the study will be presented separately for each of the sessions. Differences among the representatives of various professional groups taking part in the interview were clear enough to allow the distinguishing four of kinds of attitudes towards the idea of help. The results of this research – with the focus on diverse aspects of its outcomes – were published in several books and journals; here, only the findings significant for the topic of the paper will be commented. Detailed, in-depth results of the study conducted in reference to various fields of scrutiny were provided elsewhere, see: Warzywoda-Kruszynska and colleagues (2006); Woźniak (2007), Petelewicz and Rek (2007); Drabowicz (2007), Petelewicz (2007), Woźniak (2012).

It needs to be duly noted that the conclusions drawn from the research presented below characterize groups under study in the year 2006, and under no circumstances could be extrapolated to describe contemporary states of affairs. These are used as ex-

amples illustrating the questions concerning methodological issues.

## Focus Group Interview 1 – “Frontliners”

### Main Feature of the Session: Frustration

Typical for frontliners, manifested in reluctance towards the clients using the labor market, educational, and social assistance measures and in a belief that those clients are “undeserving poor.” In the opinion of frontliners, their clients represent claiming attitudes and abuse the system to receive support to which they are not entitled. They also shift these routines to the next generation. Such negative images about the clients are accompanied by frontliners' image of themselves – public sector workers – as a social group undergoing economic deprivation. The respondents underlined the lack of work ethos and the demanding attitude as factors being transmitted to the next generations: “claiming attitude towards all the state institutions and workers of these institutions. The conviction that they are the ones who deserve” (Job Advisor, FGI 1).

Interviewees also pointed to more and more frequently occurring pathological phenomenon, which they describe as “purposeful social inefficiency”: with an intention to claim that – because of benefits and social services – parents deliberately deprive their children of intellectual and social development possibilities:

[w]e have many such cases where children are not in fact sick, or we can see that they are not really sick, but they are neglected because the mother fails to work with the child, to teach him to sit, or to walk. There are

two- three-year-old children who hardly walk, hardly sit, or talk... Not because they are mentally or physically retarded, but just because they are neglected. This is simply nurturing the sickness. (Social Worker, FGI 1)

The analysis of the participants' statements allows concluding that the clients' demanding attitude, highlighted by the respondents, is coupled with a specific "demanding attitude" of the institutions implementing state social policy. Their employees, dealing directly with clients on a day-to-day basis, often rate their professional group underpaid. They complained that their salary was not much higher than the social benefits their clients received: "[i]t's just like us, we get our pay to our accounts and the lady in the bank asks if we are social services clients. That's right! But, this is a common thing for us. This embarrassment in the bank" (Social Worker, FGI 1).

Lack of satisfaction with work is not only due to insufficient pay but also the sense of inefficiency, helplessness, and lack of possibility to use the knowledge possessed in adapting measures to the specific local conditions (the feeling that the social worker's role boils down to mere distribution of the state funds). Frustration and professional burnout were also perceptible among other "frontliners":

[b]ut, we are never appreciated. Teachers are always the worst, the worst caste of people just because they are teachers. Only that all these wise people were prepared for life just by teachers. That is why teachers are often reserved and disheartened, we carry that responsibility... (Teacher, FGI 1)

The issues of dignity or civil rights of those who are the recipients of social support were not recog-

nized by the participants who perceived them as a homogeneous group sharing a common ethos and set of attitudes. Even the story of one of the social workers who was once identified as a social benefit claimant by the bank clerk (who has misjudged the transfer from Social Welfare Office as a benefit and not salary) and described this situation as a humiliation and insult, does not increase empathy towards those who experience this kind of situation in their everyday life. Openness and eagerness to discuss even quite intimate experiences allow for conclusion about the properly designed sampling.

## Focus Group Interview 2 – NGOs' Representatives

### Main Feature of the Session: "Charitable Mentality"

Although they are often very creative and emotionally engaged in their work, NGOs' representatives do not go beyond undertaking very basic actions for people in need. They do not attempt to establish network cooperation with other non-governmental organizations and/or public institutions for holistic and long-lasting solutions to local problems. The respondents' statements provide information not only about the institutions acting in the town and the initiatives and activities undertaken by them but also about the opinions and attitudes of stakeholders towards their clients, own activities, and effects of these activities. The attitudes and approaches of the public institutions' employees participating in the interviews towards the people in need differed from those presented by the representatives of non-governmental organizations. The latter seem to be more

emotionally engaged in the activities. They are also more flexible in their work, and probably more effective. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that unlike the public institutions' employees, NGOs' workers are not so much limited by stiff regulations. „Charitable mentality” means that the NGOs' activity is temporary, accidental, and resembles the 19<sup>th</sup> century charitable actions rather than well-organized prevention of poverty inheritance. The feeling of underestimation is accompanied by the conviction that there is, in fact, little that can be done for the clients and that they are “lost” in a sense.

Asked to propose solutions for breaking up the vicious circle of a low status inheritance while discussing the hypothetical case of a family during the vignette, the representatives of the public institutions manifested little creativity and reluctance to renounce well-known activity frameworks prescribed by regulations. In the case of non-governmental organizations' representatives, a considerably higher sense of work satisfaction (combined with a higher feeling of mission and emotional commitment) was reported. However, it turned out that the problems with fundraising can be a source of severe frustration for this group of actors: “[b]ut, with time, one gets burnt out. Humiliated with that constant begging, I know that from my own experience (Representative of the Polish Teachers' Union, FGI 2).

Representatives of the third sector have a sense that they are often burdened with duties that inefficient public sectors fail to realize:

[i]t seems to me that the state much too often shifts responsibility to non-governmental organizations. The

state made a blunder once and said: “You should help, but don't ask for help.” But, where to take money from? Let's take providing clothes for poor people. We receive the decision from the social services department that... Mrs. Kowalska has been directed by the social services department and she needs a fridge, blankets, clothes, et cetera, et cetera. (Polish Red Cross Representative, FGI 2).

Again, a high level of trust and common experiences allowed the reconstruction of the viewpoint of those involved in the third sector in the local environment under scrutiny and partial recognition of the circumstances leading to low levels of various actors' engagement in this kind of activities.

### **Focus Group Interview 3 – Managers in Public Institutions**

#### **Main Feature of the Session: “Official Optimism”**

The analysis demonstrated differences in attitudes of the representatives of various levels of professional hierarchy. It seems that the level of interviewees' optimism related to the possibilities of solving social problems grows together with the growth of a “distance from the client.” Unlike regular staff workers, who have day-to-day contact with social services clients, participants of FGI 3, fulfilling managerial functions in municipality, showed less pessimism in evaluation of the situation and did not define themselves as a group affected by frustration. Their knowledge was more limited and they kept on repeating the few examples of successful (or not) cases of social interventions. “Official optimism” was presented by the members of managerial rank who do not have direct contacts with the clients of their institutions in their everyday work. The attitude is

characterized by a belief that institutions existing and resources available are absolutely sufficient for conducting an effective policy of equalization of chances and counteracting intergenerational inheritance of social inequalities. The managers seemed to be very satisfied with the quality of services provided by their subordinates and their institutions. They admitted that inheritance of poverty is a serious problem; however, they also raised the arguments that in many cases it is the fault of particular people that they suffer permanent poverty, and structural factors or lack of institutional support are not to be blamed. The representatives of the managerial level in the public sector were trying to convince facilitators and themselves that any kind of inefficiency and failures of policy implemented by institutions supervised by them were caused by objective factors (underfunding by a higher level of administration), or by lack of willingness of potential end-users of the policy to get involved and to struggle to improve their own situation. These views were rather unanimous among the participants and could be perceived as defining a specific kind of attitude and groupthink prevailing among the managerial level of administration in the town under study.

#### **Focus Group Interview 4 – Local Politicians**

##### **Main Feature of the Session: “Indifference/Lack of Concern”**

The main features of session three were also observed during the session with local politicians. Their attitude was characterized – as showed the analysis of transcripts of the interviews – as “indifference/lack of concern,” which may also be understood as a “lack

of knowledge” on local social policy problems. Such a kind of attitude characterized those councilors who deal with issues related to the functioning of the community (budget and urban planning, etc.) – other than social problems left for the specialized institutions (Municipality Department of Social Services, Poviát Family Support Centre). “Indifference” is thus not always a consequence of ideological prejudice or ignorance but an effect of the division of work at the local level, where social problems do not constitute the main area of councilors’ interest. Local politicians possessed some general, and often artificial, knowledge about the social affairs in town; however, their assumptions were mainly based on personal observations and not on some official data, strategic documents, or professional evaluations. The divisions and controversies observed during this session followed the general scheme of political borders between political bodies operating at top national level. Politicians quite often were using phrases and clichés, which at that time were used in nationwide political debate and public discourse connected with forthcoming elections. Therefore, more left-wing oriented politicians were complaining on the scale of social problems (unemployment) caused by the economic transformation, and more hawkish supporters of neoliberal thinking were proving that:

And, what was I to say about all this sorrow because of high unemployment. I simply don’t believe that it is so high, so devastating. It is maybe at the level of 8-10 percent. But, the rest of them are people who are registered because they want the insurance or other benefits.<sup>5</sup> (Town Councilor, FGI 4)

<sup>5</sup> The registered unemployment rate in the town was exceeding 23% at that moment. All registered unemployed have health insurance, but they do receive financial benefit only during the first six months of the unemployment period.

All respondents were following argumentation typical for the national political elites, rarely referring to the unique and concrete examples from their own areas of activity. The in-depth analysis provided some evidence that groupthink presented by members of this category could be influenced rather by the political discourse at a top level of national policy than local experiences. Certainly, this impact is connected to the way media are addressing and defining social problems.

## Summary and Conclusions

The outcomes of the study gave some important answers to the questions concerning the quality of the governance at the local level and factors influencing effectiveness of the social policy actions undertaken by various actors at the local level. Assessment of these results does not belong to the purposes of this paper. However, it has to be said that notwithstanding differences noticed in each of the groups and a common strategy, which could be described as “blame the victim,” were observed among all of them. It underlines psychological and cultural features, typical for the group of poor people who are not willing to cope with their situation using socially accepted means and generally deserve their own *status quo*. This kind of attitude presented by people responsible for projecting and implementing the social actions aimed at supporting all needy groups does not allow being optimistic about the quality and outcomes of these operations.

As to methodological issues, decisions on separating the four categories of local stakeholders into differentiated groups turned out to be beneficial for the study. It allowed researchers to point out and enumerate

some crucial and important distinctions between the groups, and also to analyze their way of thinking. All positive features of homogeneous FG, as described in the first part of the paper, were observed. Hence, it was possible to identify some features typical for the specific groupthink of each of the categories under study. Drawing a clear division line between various groups of stakeholders was found as a recommendable solution in this kind of policy-oriented FGI study, where methodological issues are often neglected, not being the main sphere of researchers' interest. It seems evident that while planning qualitative research within the institutional setting in a relatively small community where a dense network of formal and informal intertwined interrelations is affecting them, the special attention needs to be drawn to the composition of the FG.

In the aforementioned study, due to the nature of the researched phenomena (local social policy), it was impossible to compose groups of the participants who would not know each other prior to the group interviews. However, avoiding power relations between those invited for each of the groups allowed increasing the comfort of the participants, which probably also enhanced the chances to gather rich and reliable data provided by participants who felt more self-assured and confident about their expertise in a debated field and lack of threat coming from the eventual disagreement with those located higher within the institutional structure.

There is always an unavoidable risk that the pre-existing mutual acquaintanceship of the participants, even in the absence of the power relations, could increase their consistency with the group. Knowing



what opinions are accepted and/or shared by the majority of the informants could restrain them from expressing individual “non-conformist” thoughts. However, it seems that this risk would significantly grow if the general tendency to avoid the conflicts was strengthened by the presence of their superiors. A high level of cohesion and the clear divisions identified between the collective stances presented during each of the focus groups allows for cautious optimism concerning the results achieved.

While trying to follow methodology without losing the substantial theme of the research, it was not possible to make a more specific and deeper study into certain aspects of qualitative methodology in the case of the recapitulated study. However, after analyzing the results, at least several proposals could be formulated for the further, strictly methodological inquiries.

First of all, it seems to be worthy to design some strictly methodological study where outcomes of the FGI’s purposely differentiated (in references to the groups’ composition) sessions would be compared. Parallel sessions could be conducted by the same moderator with usage of the same scenario, following the same schemes in order to allow com-

parisons between sessions composed in a different way. These kinds of methodological studies could be particularly valuable and contributive for further development of research techniques.

Secondly, while studying outcomes of any research conducted with FGIs, the homogeneity of the groups should be thoroughly discussed in reference not only to the main characteristic defining participants as the proper informants for a given research. This is far insufficient while analyzing interviews in reference to group dynamics or groupthink, where homogeneity in reference to gender, social class, education, and, in many cases, position within work hierarchy could be main exploratory factors.

Thirdly, the composition of focus groups could be one of the main factors defining differences between the outcomes of the interviews within one research project. Therefore, various patterns of participants’ behavior deserve particularly careful attention of the researchers. These issues should be taken into account not only while designing the FGI research but could also be treated as an important separate topic of investigation into socio-psychological aspects of communication within the group.

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## Homogeniczność grup fokusowych drogą do sukcesu w badaniach? Szkic metodologiczny z badań terenowych

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł podejmuje temat doboru próby podczas projektowania badań jakościowych. Szczególną uwagę zwraca się tu na kompozycję grup fokusowych ze względu na dwa ważne aspekty: ich homogeniczność pod względem pozycji badanych w społeczno-zawodowej hierarchii oraz wcześniejszych wzajemnych relacji pomiędzy uczestnikami jednej grupy. Ta druga kwestia wiąże się blisko i bezpośrednio z pierwszą w sytuacji, gdy uczestnicy fokusów objęci są analizą w swoim otoczeniu instytucjonalnym, a badanie prowadzone jest w relatywnie małej społeczności lokalnej. Te zagadnienia omówione są w odniesieniu do dostępnej literatury metodologicznej. Następnie zaprezentowany jest przykład badania przeprowadzonego w wyżej wymienionych okolicznościach, by wskazać zalety homogenicznej kompozycji grup fokusowych podczas rekonstruowania zbiorowych postaw przedstawicieli poszczególnych szczebli administracji publicznej. Uniknięcie relacji władz i podległości okazało się owocne i skuteczne. Zasadnicze różnice pomiędzy grupami było łatwo zidentyfikować, mimo że w przypadku tego badania nie do uniknięcia była wcześniejsza znajomość uczestników przed rozpoczęciem sesji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** grupy fokusowe, wywiady grupowe, metodologia badań jakościowych, dobór próby, homogeniczność