

# Interrogating Paradigmatic Commitments of Focus Group Methodology: An Invitation to Context-Sensitive Qualitative Research Methods

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# **Interrogating Paradigmatic Commitments of Focus Group Methodology: An Invitation to Context-Sensitive Qualitative Research Methods**

## **Abstract**

Paradigmatic methodological guidelines predominantly reflect communicative norms of societies where the methods were developed and formalized. Using the example of Focus Group Discussions, we highlight the dangers of indiscriminately following paradigmatic guidelines when using qualitative methods in varied socio-cultural settings. We argue that their universal implementation can lead to ethnocentric biases in qualitative research practices. In this paper, we discuss four specific issues related to: (i) the significance of existing relationships between participants and the presence of onlookers during research, (ii) *a priori* determination of the level of privacy required by participants, (iii) considering atomistic individuals as creators of qualitative data, and (iv) overlooking the social practice aspect of research. The paper also presents our theorization of a tripartite conceptualization of research context that can facilitate a considered use of paradigmatic norms and guidelines. The paper concludes with our reflections on how qualitative research can achieve greater symmetry between its methods and the varied socio-cultural contexts where they are used.

**Keywords:** culture, qualitative research, bias, assumptions, context, methodological ethnocentrism, focus group discussion, onlookers

The indiscriminate generalization of research findings obtained in WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) settings imbue psychological knowledge with western ethnocentrism (Henrich et al., 2010; Schulz et al., 2018). Poor socio-cultural adaptations of research methods, and the unabated use of paradigmatic research norms in research settings across the world, are key contributors to the development of such ethnocentric bias. Interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and other qualitative methods are accompanied by a set of prescribed norms and guidelines which are artifacts of the specific sociocultural contexts where these methods were developed and formalized as research tools. Yet, qualitative research has not paid sufficient attention to the sociocultural biases inherent in paradigmatic versions of its methods. In order to address ethnocentrism in social science knowledge, it is crucial to recognize that methodological norms and guidelines developed in specific sociocultural contexts with specific populations are not suitable as universal principles.

In this paper we engage with this sparsely attended field and make two contributions. First, using the example of FGDs one of us conducted in rural India, we challenge paradigmatic versions of qualitative methods as universal ideals that research across different socio-cultural settings should aspire to emulate. In doing so, we demonstrate that some paradigmatic guidelines on qualitative methods may not universally align with the normative and cultural architecture of all societies. Second, we theorize how understanding research context as the dynamic and unfolding backdrop of research can help qualitative methods become more reflexive and improve their fit with the people and cultures they explore.

We use FGDs to drop our anchor within the broader debate on ethnocentric bias in qualitative methods due to the history of their development and standardization. While the method is now used across social science disciplines and in a wide range of socio-cultural settings, its development and formalization took place in a very specific context. The origin of FGDs can be traced back to Merton and Kendall's (1946) group interviews with American soldiers to identify morale boosting films. This work created a template that was used intensively throughout 1960s and 1970s in the USA by the marketing research community for understanding consumer preferences (Bloor et al., 2000; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Lee (2010) notes that in the eighties, Morgan and Spanish (1984) and Morgan (1988) brought the method to the attention of wider social sciences and subsequently, FGDs were introduced to a range of disciplinary traditions including medicine (Kitzinger, 1995), media and communication studies (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996), geography (Breen, 2006), and even software engineering (Kontio et al., 2004). The origin and formalization of FGD methodology in 'consumer-oriented, white, middle-class, western society' (Krueger, 1995, p. 529) for narrow goals of market research, makes it an excellent basis for examining ethnocentric biases in paradigmatic versions of qualitative methods.

### **Interrogating *a priori* commitments of paradigmatic versions of methods**

There is a developing recognition that aspects of FGD methodology need to be adjusted according to the demands of the settings. For instance, the canonical guidebook by Krueger and Casey (2014) includes a full chapter on international and cross-cultural issues in focus groups where the authors consider how the socio-cultural context of the setting

demands adjustments to the researcher's approach. Similarly, dedicated texts such as Hennink (2007) provide directions for using FGDs in international contexts. Indeed, researchers working with diverse cultural groups often modify the tasks and processes involved in organizing FGDs. These include, for example, using community elders to recruit participants (Fallon & Brown, 2002) or remaining particularly attentive to gender issues when interviewing women (Winslow, 2002). In these and other similar instances, adapting the method involves enhancing cultural competence of researchers working in unfamiliar settings (Vissandjée et al., 2002). However, researchers seldom question universally accepted *a priori* methodological principles that underpin the processes and norms of communication during FGDs. In this paper, we challenge the guiding philosophy that “many of the principles of focus group research remain the same despite the context” (Hennink, 2007, p. xv) by demonstrating how widely accepted paradigmatic guidelines on organizing focus group discussions need to be reconsidered in certain settings.

One of the authors (AC) organized eight FGDs in the village of Bholi as part of a project exploring community perspectives on poverty and deprivation. Bholi was a deprived village of about 350 families in northern India along the Nepal border with a predominantly ‘lower-caste’ Hindu population. Most families in the village were dependent on subsistence farming or unskilled manual labor in the nearest town – a fuller description of the village is available in Chauhan (2016), and Chauhan and Campbell (2021). AC was born in the same province and as a native speaker, used the local dialect (*bajjika*) during interviews and FGDs. People were approached individually and after explaining the nature and the purpose of the project, they were invited to take part in FGDs. While the village had relatively strong gendered norms when it came to outsiders, AC had spent several months in the village before commencing the empirical work of the project. This engendered a higher level of trust and confidence and despite being male, AC was able to recruit a good number of women as participants. Eventually, of the eight FGDs organized, four involved only males, one involved only females, and three were mixed gender. The small rural community of Bholi provided a unique context for interviews and FGDs and led us to reflect on some near-universal commitments in qualitative research. We use a passage of conversation from a typical FGD in the village to interrogate paradigmatic recommendations on four issues: presence of onlookers, providing privacy during research, considering participants as atomistic individuals, and implicit assumptions regarding participants’ familiarity with research processes. In the extract presented below, Ranu, Laxman, Raju, and Munna were FGD participants and Archu was an onlooker.

### **Box 1: A passage of conversation from a typical FGD in Bholi**

**Ranu:** I tell you, poor people in this village will never get employment until corruption is eliminated.

(1)

**Moderator:** So *do you* think corruption in local government is responsible for this?

(2)

**Ranu:** Yes. There is no doubt at all.

(3)

**Archu:** *You can ask anyone in the village, they will tell you the same.*  
What happened to the son of Bhartain? Everyone knows [about that].

(4)

**Ranu:** Yes. That is an interesting story.

(5)

**Archu:** Corruption is everywhere, not just the bribery for jobs. *We want* to get grains from the [public distribution] shops, *we never get* the full quota. The dealer always *gives us* four kilos when he has to give five. Five liters [of kerosene] when he has to give seven. That too is corruption.

(6)

[...]

**Raju:** It is like Archu was saying earlier. The [public distribution] dealer operates with a degree of impunity. He can do whatever he wants, and we do not have any control. You try to [oppose] and he would simply find some fault with your ration card and not give you anything. (7)

**Archu:** Right.

(8)

**Munna:** Yes, that happens all the time. He is such a scoundrel.

(9)

**Laxman:** But that is their [government's] responsibility. *We are* public. *We cannot* make decisions. They can. They have to think of what is more important. *The misfortune of* [this] *village* is that whether it was Lalu [past Chief Minister] or Nitish [current Chief Minister], all they want is power. This is the problem.

(10)

**Raju:** He is right.

(11)

**Munna:** Yes.

(12)

**Laxman:** Sir, I have to go now. I need to take my wife to the market and if I don't leave now, it will get dark. I have said all I had to say, I think Archu has much more experience of all this. He will tell you many interesting stories. Would you come tomorrow? Do find me. I need to talk to you about [omitted]. (13)

**Moderator:** Yes, Yes. I will come [tomorrow]. I come every day. I will find you, surely. (14)

**Raju:** Yes, Archu, come, sit. You know about it all and you can tell it well too. You see, he was in school longer than all of us. How long did you go to school? [You completed your] Matric? (15)

**Archu:** No. I didn't [chuckles]. I ran [away from the village] in 9th to Delhi to earn. (16)

**Munna:** Sit, sit. (17)

[Everyone welcomes Archu. Small talk is made, and discussion continues]

### **Significance of pre-existing relationships and the presence of onlookers**

There is a near universal guideline in qualitative research to hold interviews and FGDs in a 'non-distracting area where uninterrupted conversation can occur' (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005, p. 175). Ideal-type research interviews and FGDs are organized in private spaces behind closed doors. Focus groups organized in Bholi did not follow this guideline because none of the groups met in a private setting – in fact almost all participants insisted on using public spaces. Given the public setting of FGDs, several onlookers were present during most FGDs. Once again, there is a near universal agreement that onlookers must be avoided across all social, cultural and geographic settings as they infringe upon participants' privacy and influence the data (for e.g. see Hennink, 2007 esp. pp. 153-160; Krueger & Casey, 2014 esp. pp. 308-310). Working in Bholi required us to abandon paradigmatic guidelines towards onlookers as they not only included people who listened in out of curiosity but many of them were invited by research participants to form an *ad hoc* audience. As the extract presented in the paper shows, contributions of onlookers like Archu directly fed into the discussion. What is more, as is also captured in the extract, these onlookers were often invited by other participants to formally join the group.

The term 'onlooker' prioritizes a researcher's gaze on the field where within the context of the data generated, people are categorized as either 'researchers' or 'participants'.

People who are present during the data collection process but are neither researchers nor participants are categorized as onlookers. However, we need to question whether this researcher-defined category ‘onlooker’ is meaningful from the vantage point of participants. Paradigmatic focus groups are composed of strangers but often either the research question, or the research setting, makes it impossible to convene a group of complete strangers. In small community settings like Bholi, there are very few strangers. People recruited to participate in research have past histories of everyday interactions and often necessities of continuing them in the future. Unlike strangers coming together solely for the purposes of research, their relevance to each other goes beyond the role they play as participants in an ephemeral research event. They are not merely ‘participants’ or ‘onlookers’ to each other but also friends, neighbors, adversaries, and in general people with life histories and relevant stories of their own. As such, the undifferentiated and homogenized category of onlookers that researchers work with holds little relevance and meaning for the community itself.

Pre-existing relationships among participants have significant impact on not only the issue of onlookers but the nature of data produced in FGDs itself. When social statuses and power hierarchies between participants are already established, the norms of the ensuing conversation are not manufactured entirely during the FGD but draw on pre-existing relationships, and normative power hierarchies. This is routinely evident in research studies where participants are not complete strangers to each other. For example, in FGDs organized in Washington state with American Indian tribes, Strickland’s (1999) participants were either neighbors or related to one another. The dynamics of conversation were shaped by the traditions of the community and existing power hierarchies. High-status community elders did not speak in the discussion and Strickland had to invite them separately to gather their inputs. Similarly, in Feinstein’s (2009) work, the village Chief exercised total control over the composition of FGDs with the Maasai people of Tanzania.

The extract from our work in Bholi shows how existing relationships and social status of the onlooker Archu influenced his impact on the research. Archu was an older man who was regarded as a knowledgeable elder and his comments were attentively addressed and used by the participants to inform their discussion. In line 13 Laxman shows deference towards Archu by referring to his ‘experience’ and underlines the significance of his cultural memory. Perhaps for the benefit of the researcher, in line 15 Raju further highlights that Archu had more years of formal education than the rest of the group. Not surprisingly, the subsequent discussion continued to follow Archu’s lead in conversation. The passage also shows how conversations in FGDs are shaped by participants’ familiarity with each other’s lives and a shared knowledge of intimate events in the village which are not a resource available to a group of strangers in paradigmatic focus groups. The exchange between lines 1 and 5 provides a clear illustration. Ranu makes an assertion (line 1), which is queried by the researcher (line 2). In line 4, Archu is able to draw upon a story from the village’s past (“what happened to Bhartain’s son”) that ostensibly illustrated Ranu’s assertion. The story of “what happened to Bhartain’s son” belonged to the collective memory of the village but at the same time was very different to collective memories that strangers tend to share. This was an intimate collective memory of a relatively unimportant event but was apposite to the discussion at hand. Such shared stories are seldom available as a resource in a group

composed of strangers but in Bholi, it quickly facilitated the development of a consensus and propelled the conversation forward.

On the one hand, proponents of an unwavering commitment to paradigmatic principles of qualitative research can argue that Strickland failed to create an atmosphere of conversation, Feinstein lost their independence in research, and in Bholi the researcher had poor control over the onlooker situation. On the other hand, qualitative researchers need to acknowledge that when a group does not involve strangers, expectations of regulated, regimented, and controlled FGDs must be tempered. The conversational dynamics of participants in Bholi, or those in Strickland's and Feinstein's research, tend to be fundamentally different from a group of strangers coming together in a paradigmatic FGD. Nuances of people and their existing relationships, contexts, and settings often get sanitized from the data produced in FGDs in such settings. With an inclination towards creating nomothetic knowledge, the relational and sociocultural entanglement of the data are rarely taken into consideration. Later in the paper we will discuss the problematic assumption that FGDs and interviews are tools that necessarily provide access to participants' personal ideas but at this stage it is sufficient to emphasize the importance of considering the relational embeddedness of what is said during FGDs and interviews.

### **Privacy during interviews and FGDs: preference or imposition?**

Providing complete privacy to participants during interviews and FGDs is another near-universal guideline of qualitative research which was not possible in Bholi where FGDs were organized in public settings as per the preferences of participants. The need for some privacy is a universal but privacy is a complicated construct. It is not a static attribute in people's preferences – what they choose to keep private depends on a range of factors. Given the selective nature of privacy, should qualitative researchers universally formulate and impose a framework of privacy? Privacy involves people controlling what aspects of their Self they make available to others (Altman, 1975). It is, therefore, a social need which is influenced by variations in socialization, culture, and the demands of the situation that calls for a reflection on the desired level of privacy. Within this framework, thresholds of privacy become negotiated realizations that depend on the context and we can begin to interrogate the stringent recommendation for it during research interviews and FGDs.

Research interviews are non-naturalistic communicative events that take place because of one party's (interviewer's) interest in a topic and the other party's (interviewee's) agreement to engage. By agreeing to participate in research, people cede the complete privacy they hitherto had from the researcher and voluntarily choose to provide access to their Selves. In group situations like FGDs, participants provide this access not only to the researcher but other participants as well. It has been noted that if the group develops a norm of intimate self-disclosure, participants may end up losing their privacy beyond the threshold they may have originally set for themselves (Kelman, 1977). Further, questions asked by researchers constitute systematic efforts to access and explore participants' private worlds, perhaps even ones that they did not intend to reveal in the first instance (Britten, 1995; Price, 2002; Stokes & Bergin, 2006; Wong, 2008). Proceeding in this manner allows us to recognize that the issue of privacy in research is one of participants' ongoing realization of its



threshold. Researchers can never be certain which of their questions will invade which participants' privacy – people differ with regard to how much of their Selves they are comfortable in revealing and the same set of questions may have diverging privacy implications for different participants.

We can achieve a resolution of the problematic by emphasizing that all conversations are shaped by the *talkability* and *tellability* of the intended talk. Valsiner (2007) outlines talkability as a collective cultural concept which is normative insofar as determining whether talking about something is socially acceptable or not. Tellability, on the other hand, is a personal affective limit, which influences whether one is *able* to express something publicly. To illustrate, the talkability on sexual issues is low in many societies making it likely that a discussion on the topic would be sparse. On the other hand, people may not talk about a corrupt local bureaucrat because they fear retribution – a limit imposed by tellability of the information. For example, onlookers, so fiercely reviled in paradigmatic commitments to participant privacy, can only influence tellability of information during interviews and FGDs. However, this is not a problem posed only by onlookers. In FGDs, research participants will almost always have an impact on each other's limits of tellability and in individual interviews, the researcher will also determine what the participant deems as tellable. Similarly, the subjective limits on tellability will continue to determine whether or not any question posed by the researcher will be answered candidly by a specific participant. In essence, tellability is an intra-psychological limit to which a researcher has no access and cannot exercise any effective control over it. While skilled qualitative researchers may successfully create environments of enhanced talkability, the boundary between what is deemed revealable and what is kept private is not fixed for any participant, at any point in time.

In this light, it is clear that we need to consider participants' preferences for privacy to be determined by the unique and different research environments created by each research exercise. The topic of research frames the context in which interviewees converse and establish the thresholds of talkability, tellability, and privacy. In Bholi, the topic of research — poverty in the village — was relevant to the entire village and not just the selected participants. Endemic poverty was a shared public reality for the whole village and as Giordano et al. (2007) have observed, it is not unusual for participants to not require privacy for topics that are collectively relevant to the community. Similarly, participants' needs for privacy are also determined by their socialization and the cultural backdrop of the society where the research takes place. In contrast to urban settings and industrialized societies (Fern, 2001), high levels of privacy are neither expected by people nor sanctioned by the prevailing norms in smaller tightly knit communities.

High privacy creates knowledge that is available only to the Self or revealed to intimate others (Bellman, 1981) and as a result, demands for privacy have symbolic significance – they indicate a lack of intimacy and belonging and a desire to be separate. In Bholi, participants' insistence on holding the discussion in public settings can be interpreted as a strategy for affirming the strength of their local relationships. To them, the researcher was an outsider and interacting with him in full public view emphasized participants'

belonging and intimacy with the rest of the village. It may even be argued that participants invited onlookers to demonstrate their relationality with the village community and show that they weren't betraying their belonging. Within smaller and intimate communities, a very thin line separates privacy from secrecy. As Warren and Laslett (1977) note, privacy and secrecy only differ in the moral connotations of the concerned behavior. As opposed to privacy, secrecy is not consensual and is associated with efforts to conceal and in many sociocultural settings, speaking to a researcher behind closed doors would be understood as a secretive interaction.

The discussion makes it evident that the researcher does not need to make *a priori* commitments to providing participants with complete privacy. Depending on the research question and the sociocultural context, the threshold of privacy required by the participants can be much lower than what is paradigmatically assumed. Instead of stringent commitments to privacy, qualitative research needs to shift its focus on ascertaining participants' desired level of privacy in a more nuanced and contextually informed fashion.

### **Atomistic or relational individuals as sources of verbal data?**

Most individual or group interview research is relativist in its ontology and constructionist in its epistemology. However, they often implicitly assume that participants speak as atomistic individuals whose *inner states*, aided by the ongoing conversation, guide what they say during an interview<sup>1</sup>. This problematic is representatively illustrated in Krueger and Casey's (2014) celebrated guidebook on FGDs. In a dedicated chapter titled "*international and cross-cultural focus group interviewing*", the authors recommend that researchers in new cultural settings should approach the process as an outsider but simultaneously remind them to "remember that each person in a focus group really only speaks for him or herself" (p. 198). The view that individuals communicating in a group do so with atomistic independence ignores that all acts of communication serve both informational and relational purposes. However, the latter is as important as the former when FGD participants have pre-existing and continuing social bonds as we previously discussed.

The extract from Bholi provides a representative illustration of how the informational content of communication gets shaped by implicit relational goals. The italicized segments in the extract capture participants' need to reinforce harmony, agreement, and consistency in their worldview. In line 2, the researcher asked for Ranu's individual opinion which the latter provided in line 3. We immediately see the onlooker Archu rushing in to clarify that Ranu's opinion was indeed the shared position of the entire community (line 4). Archu continued to frame all his ideas as the shared position of the whole village (line 6) and the same collective voice is also eminently evident in Laxman's inputs (line 10). The relational orientation of the participants is also revealed in the passage between lines 13 and 18 when the collective

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<sup>1</sup> The term *inner state* is used here as a quasi-scientific idea referring to a person's life experiences, memories, beliefs, and the like.

marshals itself to fulfil its obligations towards the researcher by finding a replacement for the exiting participant.

Relationship-maintenance motivation of participants during research interviews and FGDs challenge the assumption that participants' inner states or true beliefs are captured in the research process. There is overwhelming evidence that people make sense of situations by drawing upon their belonging and relationships to act in ways that are considerate of the needs, views, and perspectives of others (Font et al., 2016; Jaghoory et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2018; Mugadza et al., 2019; Oyserman, 2017; Pfundmair et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2016). In many instances cultural norms and obligations to the collective determine what is revealed to people who do not belong to the community. In cultures across Asia, the informational content of conversations people have with outsiders is regulated by constructs such as *lajja-baya* (shame-fear in Sri Lanka; Munasinghe & Celermajer, 2017; Spencer, 1990), *izzat* (collective honour in Northern India and Pakistan; Gilbert et al., 2004, 2007), and *face* in China (Ye & Pang, 2011). Filtered through the lens of these constructs, the actions and ideas of individuals have significant implications for the collective at large – what a person reveals during research interviews can result in the entire collective losing its honor and experiencing public humiliation.

In this light, qualitative research needs to soften its stance on treating data as if it successfully captured ideas of insular atomistic individuals speaking for their own selves. The data generated through research interviews and FGDs are also shaped by the relational nature of people and the obligations they have towards their groups.

### **The social practice aspect of research interviews**

Like all codified communicative activities, ideal-type research interviews and FGDs require the parties involved to have a shared schematic understanding of the communicative goals, roles, processes, and social norms that regulate the activity (Blumer, 2004; Gumperz, 1982). However, compared to other interactions such as teacher-student, parent-child, and doctor-patient, the interviewer-interviewee framework of conversation has a relatively recent origin (Benney & Hughes, 1956).

Societies also differ radically with regard to the socialization they provide in the interview-type conversations where people adopt specific roles and take turns in speaking (Denzin, 2001; Pezalla et al., 2012). As Atkinson and Silverman (1997) note, some societies have become 'interview societies' where this communicative activity has become a part of the everyday lives of people. In these societies people get regularly exposed to the norms of the interview from a young age and when acting as participants, they use their familiarity with it to facilitate the process of research.

The work of developmental psychologist Peggy Miller and colleagues provides an excellent illustration of how prior socialization in interviews shapes the dynamics of research. Miller et al. (2002) conducted interviews with American and Taiwanese mothers to explore beliefs about self-esteem in the context of cross-cultural child-rearing. They note that mothers in a mid-western University town in the United States of America were fully socialized in the script of research interviews and the method unfolded in its near paradigmatic form: the

participants sat across from the researcher in a formal manner, they stuck close to the task and waited for the researcher to ask questions, and even asked their children to not interrupt the interview. On the other hand, interviews with mothers from a small farming community in Taiwan followed a very different pattern. They were carried out while the mothers were engaged in their day-to-day activities, multiple family members were present and often joined the conversation, and unlike American mothers, participants struggled to maintain a focused back-and-forth and turn-taking nature of conversation.

Participants' lack of familiarity with the script of research interviews can result in ruptures that researchers seldom encounter in interview societies. The extract from Bholi used in this paper provides another pertinent illustration. Laxman exited the discussion before it was formally complete and invited the onlooker Archu to take his place. Such an occurrence would be highly unusual in interview societies where participants understand the FGD to be an event regulated and controlled by the researcher. The paradigmatic methodological literature would consider these occurrences as disruptive and in violation of FGD norms but it is important to recognize that they merely reflect the lack of socialization of people in the social practice of interviews.

Interviews are a reflection of the people, the place, and the time as noted by Mishler (1991). Qualitative researchers often work with participants who are not socialized in research interviews and in such situations, instead of steadfastly observing a strict set of universal norms and procedures, flexibility and consideration for the local conversational norms is essential for generating authentic research data.

### **A move towards context-sensitive qualitative methods**

Strict codification of research practices and methodological traditions is common not only in the social sciences but also in the natural sciences as Gerard Holton (1996) has seminally noted. Methodological guidebooks often present a paradigmatic, ideal-type version of qualitative research tools which researchers try to emulate in their field. The standardization of qualitative research processes is a significant problem in the social sciences as it makes our methods rigid (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004, 2015). In this paper, using the example of FGDs conducted in an Indian village, we explored some universally accepted norms around structure, participant privacy, and the presence of onlookers. When stripped of paradigmatic dictates, FGDs conducted across all sociocultural settings share six things. They all (i) involve human participants (ii) and these human participants speak publicly — it is often assumed that they do so conversationally, to each other and to the moderator; (iii) the discussions are based around topics of interest to the researcher but not necessarily to the participants; (iv) the interaction among participants is overseen by moderator(s); (v) the verbal and/or non-verbal outputs form the data; and finally, (vi) FGDs are a temporally finite communicative event with a beginning and an end — often, this coincides with the period for which the process is documented with manual notes or with audio-visual recordings. However, no two FGDs are alike and that makes them, and the general corpus of qualitative tools, valuable.

Going beyond the specific method of FGDs, the issues raised in this paper speak to the systematic biases that paradigmatic guidelines can create in qualitative methods, especially when they are poorly matched to the settings of research. The issues raised in this paper reflect the sociocultural specificities that we encountered during our research in India. They are not exhaustive and researchers working in other settings with other qualitative methods may be aware of several other latent assumptions that guide research practices. People and their social worlds present an inherently complex field of study and we must acknowledge the limits of the tools we use to study them. Research interviews, FGDs, and other related methods of verbal data generation are among the most widely used methods in social sciences. Their widespread use has led researchers to incorrectly consider them as tools that allow a direct access to the minds of participants. It has been suggested that the interview provides the researcher with an “opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988, p. 9) or even with a tool to cast “an authentic gaze into the soul of another” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 305). Similarly, the obsession with accessing the inner states of individuals has left the group in a FGDs being thought as a weakness “because the group itself may influence the nature of the data it produces” (Morgan, 1988, p. 15).

These perspectives precipitate a misguided implicit belief that research interviews and FGDs provide access to data that already exists in the minds of participants. As a result, much like a palaeontologist excavating fossils in the field, qualitative researchers end up following codified methodological procedures in the hope of extracting data from the minds of participants. Researchers are often driven by an apprehension that unless they stringently implement paradigmatic methodological guidelines across all kinds of research contexts, the recorded talk may not be considered as credible data. Such a nomothetic approach disregards how societies are already structured and ordered prior to the researcher’s interest in studying them. As the anthropologist Charles Briggs (1986) reminds, knowledge created using research interviews is “produced jointly by the interviewer and the respondent” (p.3). This requires a change in our perspective on research interviews and FGDs. Qualitative research must move away from treating them as codified tools and consider them as situated communicative events where instead of being collected, the data is generated. With such a reformulated perspective on interviews and FGDs, researchers can adopt a reflexive position on methodological norms and evaluate their relevance according to the needs of the research. The commitment of a reflexive qualitative researcher should be to enhancing naturalism in their data through an increased alignment between their research methods and the social worlds in which they are used. As we have argued in this paper, the use of research interviews and FGDs needs to take the context into account to achieve a better fit with the varied societies in which they are used. But how can qualitative researchers isolate the context of their research?

The term ‘context’ is a generously used abstraction in social sciences, both as an explanatory and a problematizing rhetorical device. The challenge in apprehending context is that it is fundamentally indeterminate – it has no definite or reliable boundary. It often gets defined *a priori* by the researchers but the immediate context within which participants express their ideas is realized and reformulated by people several times even during

interviews and FGDs. In other words, the research context is an evolving backdrop to the data that we generate through interviews and FGDs. The context of a research interview, much like the context of any other social interaction, is impossible to identify in its entirety. However, its non-naturalistic and purposeful nature allows us to map the contours of the underlying context that researchers can use as a starting point. On an imaginary continuum with fixity and predictability on one end and fluidity and unpredictability on the other, we can theorize three things that shape the dynamic context of research: the research questions driving the interaction, the people involved in research, and the latent socio-cultural and normative influences of the setting.

Of the three, the research questions are the most stable and fixed contributors to the context of qualitative inquiries and data collection. In terms of the issues of privacy and onlookers that we discussed in this paper, certain research questions will create a context that mandates rigid commitments to methodological norms to ensure the welfare of the participants. For example, when interviewing on themes of genocide and incest (Mahr & Campbell, 2016; Varallo et al., 1998) or on the topic of sex and sexuality (Gill, 2015), the context created by the research questions will impose a very high normative demand for privacy during interviews. At the other extreme, the people involved in the research also shape the immediate context of the research exercise but depending on their life histories and agenda, their influence on the context can be extremely fluid. As Potter and Hepburn (2005, 2012) have regularly observed, interviews are complex interactions where the positionality of both researchers and participants keeps shifting. As a result, the contribution of researchers and participants on the research context is dynamic, evolving, and difficult to predict. Interview and FGDs on the same themes mentioned above (genocide and incest) will develop radically different contexts depending on the participants, the researchers, and the unfolding conversation. Between the two extremes rests the intermediate influence of socio-cultural norms and histories of the community or setting where the research takes place. As we have shown in this paper, the data generated in interviews and FGDs get shaped by conversational norms of the setting, participants' familiarity with the social practice of interviews, and cultural influences on talk. Culturally sensitive qualitative research needs to not only respect but understand, appreciate, and integrate the norms of conversation prevalent in the host society.

At the same time, it is improbable that any research will be able to comprehensively account for all the local influences on the context. Several determinants of the research context in Bholi were not accounted for in the study or this paper. For example, caste relationships and power-dynamics, gender relationships, the history of religious violence in the community, and local politics can be assumed to be the part of the context against which participants' ideas about poverty were developed. Our work did not include them in its arguments but readers can appreciate their contribution to research context in other published works (Burnet, 2012; Merry, 2011; Nandan & Santhosh, 2019). The three determinants of the research context we suggest here are purposefully broad to allow researchers to identify the elements most relevant to their specific project. These three determinants provide a good indication of elements that are at play when researchers and participants are constantly engaged in realizing the context, reacting to it, and though their reactions further developing

it. The unpredictable landscape of the context and its influence on the data makes all research interviews and FGDs irreplicable communicative events. In FGDs, the group and its context must be regarded as the unit of both the data generated and the analysis undertaken. In other words, data from a FGD involving six participants must not be understood as equivalent to data generated from six individual interviews<sup>2</sup>.

To conclude, guidelines developed for the settings where methods originated and were formalized have become codified practices in qualitative research. When a method steps into new sociocultural settings, or indeed in a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural, it need not be guided by existing codified practices, nor aspire to achieve idealized paradigmatic versions that guidebooks often portray. In this paper we have illustrated how ethnocentric biases can creep into qualitative methods when rigid paradigmatic norms ignore the context and dictate our methods. As Simonds and Christopher (2013, p. 2185) have articulated beautifully, “gathering data from an indigenous person does not necessarily indicate that indigenous knowledge has been gathered”. Research across varied socio-cultural contexts, and in multicultural societies, will create authentic indigenous knowledge only when our methods remain flexible to assimilate the needs of the setting. The arguments we presented in this paper do not embody a move to dilute rigor and quality but one towards making research more context-sensitive and reflexive. Just as six different researchers equipped with different concerns and analytic lenses reach different conclusions from the same data (Dean et al., 2018), the same methods generate different data with the same people due to the uniqueness of the unfolding research context. Qualitative research must embrace tensions between flexibility and rigidity in its methods, processes, and interpretations. It is neither within its remit to seek, nor necessary for it to aspire to codification and standardization of methodological procedures akin to natural sciences. The task of qualitative research, thus, is of making its tools sufficiently reflexive to facilitate authentic understanding of the world views of people with varied socialization, communicative preferences, and life histories.

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