

Focus Groups in Brazilian Research: Current Scenario and Methodological Challenges

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Abstract: Based on an integrative review, this study aimed to critically discuss the use of focus groups in empirical research in Brazilian Psychology over the last two decades and to qualify the methodological decisions of those who opt for this approach. Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO were consulted, finding 62 articles in national journals in the area. The primary contexts of use were work, education, health, and social, with wide theoretical diversity. There has been a significant growth of the technique in research in Psychology since 2002, despite the need for improvement in the description of selection procedures, group composition, number of participants, the script for conducting, analysis, and presentation of results. However, it is necessary to ensure alignment between objective, theory, and method to improve the use of focus groups in psychological interventions.

Keywords: focus group, qualitative research, psychology

Grupos Focais na Pesquisa Brasileira: Cenário Atual e Desafios Metodológicos

Resumo: A partir de uma revisão integrativa, o objetivo do estudo foi discutir criticamente o uso de grupos focais nas pesquisas empíricas da Psicologia brasileira nas últimas duas décadas e qualificar as decisões metodológicas daqueles que optam por essa abordagem. Foram consultadas as bases Scopus, Web of Science e SciELO, encontrando-se 62 artigos em periódicos nacionais da área. Os principais contextos de utilização foram trabalho, educação, saúde e social, com ampla diversidade teórica. Concluiu-se que houve um crescimento significativo da técnica nas pesquisas em Psicologia desde 2002, apesar da necessidade de aprimoramento na descrição dos procedimentos de seleção, composição dos grupos, número de participantes, roteiro de condução, análise e apresentação dos resultados. Contudo, é necessário garantir o alinhamento entre objetivo, teoria e método para melhorar o uso de grupos focais em intervenções psicológicas.

Palavras-chave: grupos focais, pesquisa qualitativa, psicologia

Grupos Focales en la Investigación Brasileña: Escenario Actual y Desafíos Metodológicos

Resumen: A partir de una revisión integradora, el objetivo de este estudio fue discutir críticamente el uso de grupos focales en investigaciones empíricas de la Psicología brasileña durante las últimas dos décadas y calificar las decisiones metodológicas de quienes optan por este enfoque. Se consultaron Scopus, Web of Science y SciELO, y dio como resultado 62 artículos en revistas nacionales del área. Los principales contextos de uso fueron el laboral, educativo, sanitario y social, con amplia diversidad teórica. Se concluye que hubo un crecimiento significativo de la técnica en la investigación en Psicología desde 2002, a pesar de la necesidad de mejorar la descripción de los procedimientos de selección, composición del grupo, número de participantes, guion de realización, análisis y presentación de resultados. Sin embargo, es necesario asegurar la alineación entre objetivo, teoría y método para mejorar el uso de grupos focales en intervenciones psicológicas.

Palabras clave: grupos focales, investigación cualitativa, psicología cualitativa

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In the early 2000s, academic and professional circles did not use focus groups significantly as a research technique to understand psychological phenomena and support practical interventions (Cyr, 2019; Gondim & Araújo, 2013). Contemporaneously, however, focus groups appeared as an alternative to other data collection techniques, such as directive interviews and questionnaires, which seek to capture human subjectivity (perceptions, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, values, etc.) only at the individual level (Krüeger & Casey, 2009; Tadjewski, 2016). One of the key aspects that contributed to the transposition from the individual level (singular subjectivity) to that of the group (intersubjectivity) was the understanding that the formation of our beliefs, values, and perceptions of the world result from processes of social influence. Therefore, focus groups would be a methodological alternative to capture these processes by creating an artificial setting where several people could interact to discuss a specific topic.

According to Morgan (2001), from the 1990s onwards, there was a significant increase in guidance manuals on using focus groups in marketing, social sciences, and health research (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Fern, 2001; Greenbaum, 1998). In Brazil, publications of methodological articles began to appear in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Carlini-Cotrim, 1996; Gondim, 2002) and gradually expanded (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2013; Trad, 2009). A milestone to be highlighted in the international literature was the special issue of *Qualitative Health Research* in May 2010, edited by Morgan and Bortoff, in whose editorial they pointed to the expansion and increasing diversity of uses of focus groups, depending on the objectives of the study or project of intervention. This makes it challenging to have a standardized way to guide their application. The articles published in the aforementioned special issue present advances in focus groups as a research method. It discusses the methodological decisions involved in research designs (participants, location, triggering questions, moderation, data analysis - discourse, conversation, and rhetoric).

In addition to manuals, there was also an increase in the production of empirical studies, both qualitative and mixed design. In qualitative design studies, the focus group appears as the primary source of data collection. In contrast, in mixed design studies, it serves to deepen the results of survey research or even as a preliminary step to help in the construction of measurement items to be tested later on broader samples (Gondim & Araújo, 2013; Morgan, 2001; Nyumba et al., 2018; Trad, 2009).

While there is some elasticity in its characterization and there is no consensus among researchers, the focus group can be defined as a research method (a means) in which a social interaction setting is created between four and twelve people to discuss a specific topic, under the mediation of a moderator (Gondim, 2002; Gondim & Araújo, 2013; Kind, 2004). We defend the point of view that over time, focus groups have surpassed the status of

an accessory technique to other data collection techniques, as they have assumed a leading role as a privileged route through which one has access to aspects of subjectivity, resulting from processes of mutual influence, the basis of the constitution of our subjectivity. Theories of group processes and the formation/development of social groups offer rich theoretical-epistemological support to reinforce focus groups as a method, directing the level of analysis to what occurs in the group.

Focus groups differ from group interviews, even though they were derived from them (Kitzinger, 2000). In group interviews, the target of observation is the individual influenced by the group. In contrast, in the focus group, the unit of analysis shifts to what occurs in the group as a result of interactive dialogue, mainly, but not exclusively, in terms of consensus and dissent.

Therefore, although challenging for data analysis, the process of social interaction is a hallmark of focus groups. The process of mutual influence within the group has repercussions on the opinions expressed, with different intensity and frequency, going beyond the limits of a dyadic relationship (interviewer-interviewee). In addition to this advantage, focus groups make the social environment more faithful to everyday life, in which we are constantly exposed to other people's opinions (Kind, 2004). Our beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors only have relative autonomy, given that when we identify as belonging to social groups, we adhere to a worldview aligned with the shared image that this group is building and consolidating.

Supported by Ruiz's (2009) discourse analysis proposal, at least three levels of discourse (in the sense of verbal enunciation) can be apprehended in focus groups: object (utterance by each person individually), context (stated as a singular fact, as the person utters considering the context in which they place the topic in their vision and that of other referents), and interpretation (utterance explained at the sociological and ideological level as a social product, as utterances, whether individual or shared, reproduce discursive practices representative of a collective subject - see Spink (2004). This power of enunciation at different levels increases the potential contribution of focus groups to analyze the worldviews of different groups and social segments on multiple topics that affect everyday life. Such enunciation levels expand the possibilities of using and analyzing focus groups in empirical research, especially in Psychology, in which discussing a topic becomes essential to understanding the subjective universe and the worldviews that guide everyday actions.

Approximately twenty years have passed since the publication in *Paidéia* of a methodological article on the use of focus groups (Gondim, 2002). The article mentioned above, in addition to offering recommendations on how to use focus groups, pointed out some methodological challenges that required the attention of the researcher who chooses to include them in their research, such as

the lack of control over the moderator's performance, the determination of the level of analysis of the response (individual x group), the search for objectivity in the interpretation of data and the limitations of comparing results obtained via focus groups with other sources of investigation.

Added to these challenges are social, cultural, and technological transformations that, over these two decades, influenced the way of doing science. In this sense, the emergence of the online or virtual focus group (Murray, 1997) stands out, for example. This modifies the way the technique is conducted, allowing the use of synchronous (in real-time) or asynchronous (at different times for the different parties involved) writing, video and/or audio (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2022), with advantages and disadvantages that the researcher must carefully consider.

To update the methodological challenges of using focus groups in Psychology research in Brazil, inspired by the 2002 article, we searched for empirical articles in Psychology journals from the last 20 years (2002-2021). Based on an integrative review, the study's objective was to critically discuss the use of focus groups in empirical research in Brazilian Psychology over the last two decades and to qualify the methodological decisions of those who opt for this approach.

We also sought to identify in which sub-areas of Psychology the use of the technique became more significant and which theoretical-conceptual basis guided the planning and analysis of the focus groups. We also analyzed the justifications for methodological decisions, such as the criterion of homogeneity or heterogeneity for the composition of the focus groups. Finally, we analyzed the alignment between problem, objective, conceptual basis, procedures (including script), and types of data analysis (Gondim, 2002; Gondim & Araújo, 2013; Murdoch et al., 2010).

Hopefully, this general overview of the use of focus groups in Psychology research will improve its instrumental application. Although we agree with Morgan and Bortoff (2010) in arguing that the vast diversity of use of focus groups disallows adherence to a single model of use, we intend to contribute to the qualified training of new researchers in the field of methodological justifications that guide the option by focus groups.

Method

To map the literature, we predominantly adopted the integrative review guidelines (Snyder, 2019). Although we also adopted some steps referenced by the Prisma protocol, we did not meet two criteria: independent judges and the focus on evidence of validity of the results of empirical

studies. Despite not including theoretical studies, we tried to get closer to the format of an integrative review by analyzing the steps and methodological decisions adopted in the studies.

The planning protocol included the search stages (in which keywords, databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established) and review execution (reading abstracts, identifying eligibility, reading in total, and mapping key categories). The first stage of the search took place from August to September 2022 in the Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO databases, which present the majority of qualified scientific production in Psychology.

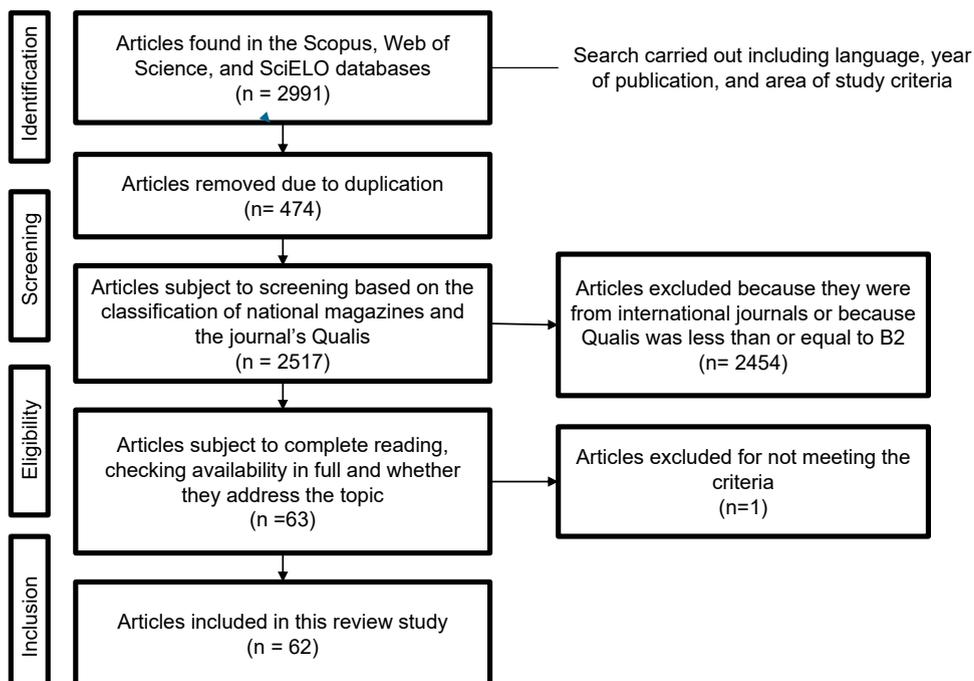
A combination of two groups of keywords was used, connected by the Boolean operator AND, as shown below: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("grupo focal" OR "grupos focais" OR "focal group" OR "focus groups") AND ("qualitativa" OR "qualitative"). In addition to the keywords, the following search filters were included: (1) language: only articles in Portuguese, English, and Spanish - as they are the domain of the authors and because they are the most present in national magazines; (2) area: Psychology only; (3) period: from 2002 to 2021, to cover the 20 years since the publication of the article by Gondim (2002). The results of the searches carried out in the databases mentioned above were extracted in BibTeX format and included in the State of the Art through Systematic Review (StArt) software version 2.3.4.2 for organization and sorting.

After excluding duplicate articles, only articles published in A2 or higher journals according to Qualis available on the Sucupira Platform of the Journals Portal of CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel of the Ministry of Education) (quadrennium 2013-2016) were selected. This choice sought to ensure similar quality parameters for the manuscripts analyzed. The 63 articles were distributed proportionally among the authors, and only after initial alignment, in which the coding criteria for allocation to the categories were tested, and procedural doubts were clarified, did the entire reading of the articles continue. Only in one case was a second reviewer requested to assess the possibility of excluding an article, which ended up happening. It was an excerpt from a master's thesis, which only alluded to focus groups, without any additional specification about the procedures adopted, our focus of analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the screening process flow for the 62 articles selected and analyzed.

The coding system proposed to organize the collected data highlighted the fundamental methodological information that guided using the focus group technique. The previous categorization system underwent minor subsequent adjustments based on the complete reading of the articles (open coding) (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) (Figure 2). A shared spreadsheet was created so the authors could fill it out based on previously agreed criteria.

Figure 1

Article Search and Review Flowchart



Note. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Figure 2

Organizational Structure of the Coding and Categorization System

CATEGORY	CODIFICATION
<p>1. Application context Refers to the main context of the contribution of using the technique/ method</p>	<p>1.1 Health 1.2 Work 1.3 Education/schools 1.4 Families/couples 1.5 Social/Cross-sectional contexts (e.g., domestic violence, immigration, gender, inmates, social behaviors linked to citizenship)</p>
<p>2. Theoretical-conceptual basis Explicit mention of a theoretical basis that underlies the study or presentation of concepts that allows inferring their operationalization in the focus group script</p>	<p>Excerpts from the article that allude to concepts and theoretical basis.</p>
<p>3. Use of the technique Characterization of the use of the focus group as the primary technique in research design or as a complement</p>	<p>3.1 Main source of data collection 3.2 Complementation/improvement</p>
<p>4. Segment to which the participants belong Refers to the characterization of participants in terms of focus that allows alignment between the study objective and the target audience.</p>	<p>4.1 Generational focus: belonging to a specific generation or age group – adults, older people, teenagers 4.2 Focus on the specific segment: belonging to a particular social group such as parents, professional segment (teachers, nurses, etc.), students, etc.</p>
<p>5. Selection of focus group composition Refers to the criteria for choosing participants to compose the focus groups</p>	<p>Specification of criteria for homogeneity or heterogeneity of the composition of the focus groups with the presentation of justification aligned with the study's objective.</p>
<p>6. Focus group script Refers to the procedures for conducting the focus group to trigger the discussion of topics</p>	<p>Inclusion of a script or other procedures for conducting focus groups</p>
<p>7. Ways to present results Refers to the format adopted by the researcher to present their results</p>	<p>Use of graphs, figures, tables, texts, or combined forms of speech segments (dialogued or not)</p>
<p>8. Software support Refers to the explanation of the use of computational resources for coding, categorizing, and interpreting results</p>	<p>Specification of the software used in data analysis.</p>
<p>9. Data analysis Refers to the explanation of the methodological procedures for data analysis</p>	<p>Specify how the data was treated, coded, and categorized and the foundations of the interpretative analyses.</p>

Results

Table 1 presents the scope of the studies, considering the context in which the focus groups were used, the theoretical framework, and the role of using the technique in data collection.

Concerning the context of using the focus group technique (scope), four were prevalent: work (25.8%), education (24.2%), health (24.2%), and, in a slightly lower number, social (19.3%). The use of focus groups in studying phenomena in the family context was still restricted (6.45%). When mentioned more explicitly in the article, the theoretical references or concepts supporting the research design revealed variety, which applies even to the same context. The field of work, for example, used diverse theoretical-conceptual bases: social identity and

organizational identity, the psychodynamics of work, intangible labor, and liquid modernity, among others. In the social field, the bases covered a spectrum from socio-historical psychology to social identity theory. Theoretical aspects of gender, youth, and adoption were also present in studies focusing on social issues. The theoretical-based convergence was more present in studies in the health field, with a strong emphasis on concepts related to public health policies (mental, drugs, basic assistance, and intersectorality) and the Unified Health System (SUS). In the field of education, the focus was on specific theoretical bases on cognition, learning, failure, and school violence, including drug abuse among students. Historical-cultural and socio-historical psychology were also present as theoretical bases but to a lesser extent than more traditional approaches to educational studies.

Table 1
Scope, Theoretical Framework, and Use of the Technique

Scope	n (%)	Theoretical framework/ conceptual basis	Use of the technique	n (%)
Work	16 (25.8)	social identity and organizational identity; identity and professional profile; psychodynamics of work; intangible labor; liquid modernity	Main collection source	31 (50)
Education	15 (24.2)	cognition, learning, school failure and violence, and drug abuse; historical-cultural psychology; socio-historical		
Health	15 (24.2)	public health policies (mental, drugs, basic assistance, intersectorality); Unified Health System	Secondary/ complementary source	31 (50)
Social	12 (19.3)	socio-historical psychology; social identity theory; gender, youth, and adoption		
Family	4 (6.45)	systemic theory; family gatherings; parenting		

No trend was identified concerning the role of focus groups in data collection. The studies were equally divided between those that adopted them as the primary source of data collection (50%) and as a complementary technique/in conjunction with others (50%).

Table 2 brings together information about the target audience for the investigation and the composition of the groups (homogeneous or heterogeneous). Concerning the target audience, it was observed that they were composed based on generational criteria (child, adolescent, adult, older adult) or due to the social roles occupied by the participants (parent, professional, student, etc.).

Less than a fifth of the articles evaluated adopted the generational criterion for the composition of the groups

(17.7%), with eight articles focusing on adolescents, two on children, and one on older people. On the other hand, in most articles (82.3%), group composition choices were made based on the social role of the participants. In twenty-one articles, the choice fell on the professional role, mainly in healthcare (psychologists, social workers, community health agents, and nursing workers, among others). Being a student was the target audience for five articles. Being fathers/mothers and users and patients of health services also resulted in five articles. Finally, representing several other social groups or having similar experiences was a criterion adopted in 10 articles, such as community leaders, family members of missing people, women in situations of violence, and retirees, among others.

Table 2
Generations, Social Roles, and Group Composition

Generation	n (%)	Social roles	n (%)	Composition	n (%)
Not the criterion adopted	51 (82.2)	Not the criterion adopted	11 (17.8)	Homogeneous	35 (56.0)
Adolescent	8 (12.9)	Professional social roles	21 (33.9)	Heterogeneous	27 (44.0)
Child	2 (3.2)	Students	10 (16.1)		
		Users and patients	5 (8.1)		
Older adults	1 (1.6)	Fathers and/or mothers	5 (8.1)		
		Other specific social groups (retirees, couples, members of associations, etc.)	10 (16.1)		

Concerning the composition by homogeneity or heterogeneity, the former criterion prevailed (56%), along with the choice of specific groups because they played the same roles. Other criteria for the homogeneous composition of the groups were specific scores in previous measures (e.g., high or low), work in related areas (e.g., Psychology, primary care), performance of common social roles (e.g., parents, family members, students), and similar experiences concerning the topic investigated (e.g., crack users, wives of convicts, etc.). Heterogeneous groups were slightly less representative (44%) and were present in studies in which some socio-occupational or demographic variables were included (gender, age, length of experience, etc.). Different profiles were also listed as criteria, working in different areas or playing different social roles concerning the topic studied. However, the authors generally did not include justifications for choosing the homogeneous or heterogeneous composition.

Table 3
Discussion Trigger Script, Data Analysis, Software Support, and Results

Script	<i>n</i> (%)	Data analysis	<i>n</i> (%)	Software	<i>n</i> (%)	Results	<i>n</i> (%)
Yes	37 (60)	Content analysis	39 (63.0)	Not used	51 (82.2)	Text segment + text	43 (69.0)
		No reference cited	16 (25.8)	Atlas.ti	6 (9.6)	Graph/table + text segment	8 (12.9)
No	25 (40)	Other references	7 (11.2)	NVivo	4 (6.4)	Text only	7 (11.2)
				QDA Miner	1 (1.6)	Graph/table + text	4 (6.45)

Concerning the procedures for conducting the focus group, 37 (60%) of the studies analyzed used a script to trigger the discussion of themes, although it was not very detailed in most cases. In the others, it was not possible to identify which strategy was used to trigger the discussions.

Concerning how data analysis occurred in the studies, 88% of them specified how the data was processed. Of those who did so, 39 (63%) used the thematic content analysis technique, the majority ($n = 14$) using Bardin's books (1979, 2009, 2011) as a reference. Other studies cited the following authors: Barbour (2009), Bauer (2008), Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013), Bruner (2002), Laville and Dionne (1999), Minayo (2001), and Turato (2003). In addition to thematic content analysis, discourse analysis and grounded theory were mentioned once or twice. Sixteen studies did not include references. Few studies reported having used any support software such as Atlas.ti ($n = 6$), NVivo ($n = 4$), and QDA Miner ($n = 1$).

Finally, concerning how the result presentation occurred, the predominant combination of texts and text segments was observed (69%). Seven articles presented only text form, and eight used graphs or tables combined with text and text segments.

Discussion

The analysis of the 62 articles allows us to verify a significant and diversified growth in the use of focus groups in

In addition to the results described in Tables 1 and 2, we also analyzed the number of focus groups in the studies. This number varied from one to fifteen. Only three articles did not contain this data. Most studies (77.4%) had one to three focus groups. In the 59 articles that described the total number of the sample, the number of participants varied from three to 265. Not all of them specified the number of participants per group. However, considering the information collected in those that reported the total number of groups and participants, estimating an average of 7.08 participants per group was possible. For those who specified, the number varied from three participants per group to twelve or more participants.

Table 3 presents results on the discussion trigger script, data analysis, software support (if used), and how the results were presented.

the multiple sub-areas of Psychology in the last two decades, as 44% of the total (71%) were published from 2014 onwards which highlights their wealth of application possibilities for the field of empirical research and intervention planning. Focus groups seem to contribute significantly to analyzing work processes and the functioning of professional teams, especially in health or education, helping to train, develop, and improve work processes (Gaspodini & Falcke, 2018). Social issues relevant today are also being investigated through focus groups to understand more broadly complex phenomena involving opinions, beliefs, and values, thus generating inputs for developing policies and prevention actions (Gebara et al., 2013; Souza & Brandão, 2008).

The theoretical frameworks and conceptual bases proved quite diverse, even in the same context of using focus groups. The theoretical frameworks in most of the studies analyzed were poorly explained. The format for publishing empirical studies leaves little space for detailing the theoretical framework. Another possible explanation is that focus groups are considered a qualitative technique of an exploratory nature. In some cases, the outline of a theory about the phenomenon is expected to be constructed based on the study mentioned above. However, what caught our attention, especially in the area of health, is that the studies were firmly aimed at developing public policies (Peres et al., 2017), including linking the discussion of public health to the scope of training in Psychology (Signorini et al., 2021), a fact that would require more significant explanation and

theoretical depth. A third alternative explanation for the superficiality in explaining the theoretical-conceptual bases is due to the instrumental nature of the focus groups, i.e., they are seen as a means of generating input for intervention actions, sometimes being a preliminary stage. The justification for use, therefore, is practical. Even though we recognize the limits imposed by the structuring of empirical articles that dedicate more space to the method and results than to the theoretical basis supporting the research, it cannot be ignored that this generates adverse effects on the alignment between objective, method, and study contributions to the specific field of knowledge.

Concerning methodological decisions, the composition of the focus groups, the total number of groups, and participants per group are relevant. Although manuals and methodological articles contemplate these aspects (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Carlini-Cotrim, 1996; Fern, 2001; Greenbaum, 1998), strictly speaking, such decisions depend on the objectives of the study and the variability of manifestation of the phenomenon hypothesized by the researcher. Therefore, the recommendation is to explain the justifications for methodological decisions better.

For example, if the study's objective is to investigate beliefs about domestic violence, the researcher must try to define from which angle they would like to explore such beliefs. This could occur by mapping the types of violence or analyzing the victims' perspective. This choice affects the composition of homogeneous or heterogeneous groups and the number of groups and participants per group. The more controversial and sensitive the approach to the topic, the more challenging it will be to capture the structure of meanings of consensus and dissent, requiring more groups and fewer participants per group (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Less controversial topics generally require fewer groups and support more participants per group. However, the suggested limit is twelve participants, as the high number in a group whose session lasts one and a half to two hours hinders the chances of social interaction necessary for the discussion process and the quality of the moderator's performance.

Continuing with our example, a few heterogeneous groups will likely be needed to map the types of domestic violence that people believe are most frequent. Adults of different ages, genders, and regions of the country could participate in the same group. However, if addressing victims of domestic violence is the focus, the group will undoubtedly require some homogeneity (everyone has been a victim). We can also create homogeneous groups (victims) or differentiate by gender or social segment if, in the researcher's opinion, such variables interfere with the phenomenon. Therefore, it would be possible to plan a homogeneous group of women victims of violence and a homogeneous group of adolescent victims of violence. Although children are also victims of violence, the focus group approach does not readily apply to all age groups. In this case, the approach can be indirect via access to other social actors who have contact with the children, such as community agents or the family (Gebara et al., 2013).

The lack of detail about the reasons that led to the inclusion of participants in the research analyzed stands out, which was restricted to mentioning inclusion for convenience. Considering that social interactions are a vital part of the focus group, explaining the criteria for forming each group and searching for convergences (homogeneous groups) or divergences (heterogeneous groups) is essential.

It is essential to consider that heterogeneity favors sharing new information or beliefs among group members, which can generate more defensive postures regarding their vision. On the other hand, homogeneity makes the group environment more familiar, favoring the expression of criticism about shared common experiences (Gondim, 2002). Therefore, the researcher needs to be clear about their objectives, explaining them in the description of the method (Kind, 2004; Silva et al., 2013).

In most of the 62 articles analyzed, we could not infer the basis of the methodological choices regarding group composition, number of groups, and number of participants per group. In part, the limit on the length of articles provided for in the standards of scientific journals is recognized as imposing suppression of theoretical detail and methodological information, prioritizing the presentation and discussion of results. However, detailing decisions contributes to disseminating in academia the good methodological practices for using focus groups (Cunha et al., 2020).

Studies generally did not specify the number of participants per focus group, mentioning only the total, making it challenging to infer whether they followed the guidelines for composing four to twelve people (Gondim, 2002; Gondim & Araújo, 2013; Kind, 2004). The total number of participants varied from three (Souza & Brandão, 2008) to 265, divided into twelve groups (Grisci et al., 2015).

We found that 60% of the studies reported on the script used to trigger the discussion. However, it is worrying that 40% did not do so. The script is critical to triggering the group's social interaction process and making the discussion flow, overcoming the stage of estrangement among participants (Gondim, 2002). Initially, each member observes the others, who are generally unknown, and anchors themselves to the moderator (e.g., directed gaze), intending to explore the new environment. If the script is previously tested in a pilot study, a few topics (generally four) are sufficient for the group to quickly engage in the discussion and generate the necessary inputs for the analysis and interpretation of the results. Indeed, the script or trigger for discussion in the focus group varies according to the objectives, as there are countless resources to be used, such as photos, video clippings, drawings, systematized research information, short statements, etc.

In the study by Souza & Brandão (2008), for example, collage was used to trigger a discussion about what it is like to be a female teenager on the outskirts among high school students. Therefore, while there is a range of possibilities, the choice must aim to trigger the discussion process and provide opportunities for different points of view. Additionally,

the script provides enormous assistance in analyzing focus groups and facilitating the process of prior coding, which is extremely important when a theoretical framework is already available in the literature.

Despite the increase in publications that guide the analysis and interpretation of focus groups (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Moretti et al., 2011), challenges remain regarding planning and especially the alignment between research problem, objective and methodological procedures of data collection and analysis (Moretti et al., 2011). We still have only a few models to use the group as the unit of analysis, replacing the individual level – more aligned with group or in-depth interviews. To guide methodological decisions in qualitative interview and focus group studies, Tong et al. (2007) developed a checklist with 32 items divided into three domains: (1) research team and reflexivity (8 items), covering personal characteristics of the research team and the relationship established with the participants; (2) study design (15 items), covering theoretical framework, selection of participants, setting, and data collection; (3) analysis and findings (9 items), covering analysis and presentation of results.

It is noteworthy that focus groups prove to be advantageous when one considers that social interaction in the group provokes individuals' positions that are unlikely to emerge in a dyadic situation (interviewer-interviewee) or in circumstances in which someone would be invited to answer a question in the presence of other people (group interview). In the latter case, what is probably trying to be captured is the influence of the group on individual behavior. The level of analysis is, unlike the focus group, the individual. When the focus is on the collective, the individual response is of little importance, as any enunciation is considered from the group, as it is the result of the interaction and debate of ideas that provoke members to reorganize their ways of thinking.

The challenge in the focus group analysis process has given rise to proposals attempting to rely on quantification to anchor interpretations. One of them, still practically unknown in Brazil, is the proposal by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) to quantify micro-interlocutions (micro-interlocutor analysis) by counting the participation of each member in the result of the group discussion. The participation recording matrix, for example, includes the coding of statements or verbal exemplifications that suggest agreement or disagreement, in addition to nonresponses concerning each topic.

Another path also described by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) is to analyze the group's communication process instead of thematic content analysis, emphasizing proxemics (use of distance between actors in communication), chronemic (silences and pauses), kinesic (postures and corporal movements) and paralinguistic (voice tone). All of these are capable of being coded for quantification purposes. In the manual by Krüeger and Casey (2009), other possibilities appear: constant comparison (identifying relationships between ideas and concepts, comparing groups), individual change (identifying changes in opinion) throughout the evolution of the discussion, identification of

critical incidents (events that trigger changes), and approach to central concepts (essential themes).

The support of software in analyzing the results does not seem to be essential, as around 82.4% of the articles analyzed did not mention this technological resource. It is assumed that one of the reasons is that the available software (Atlas.ti, NVivo, and QDA Miner) only partially replaces the researcher's actions. They help in the inductive coding process in textual or image material organization. Still, the definition of codes and the testing, for example, of a previous categorical system, strongly depend on the researcher's experience and maturity with qualitative data analysis. Therefore, software, in general, was created based on the principles of grounded theory and meets the needs of inductive and open coding precisely for subsequent theoretical elaboration. However, when a robust theoretical framework is already available, the researcher tends to use their experience and conceptual mastery to propose previous codes and categories, remaining open to adjusting them to capture changes that cast doubt on the theoretical basis and promote some improvement.

Another methodological challenge that appears to persist concerns the presentation of results. The textual form also prevails, including segments of the participants' speeches. There is certainly an expectation that qualitative studies give participants a voice. Still, it is essential to consider that the option for a focus group is due to the valorization of the process of social interaction as a trigger for participants' utterances. Therefore, there is a demand for results presented through dialogues between participants. We found this form of presentation in only three articles (Freire & Branco, 2016; Gaspodini & Falcke, 2018; Moura & Tamboril, 2018) among the 62 analyzed.

We therefore lack graphic and visual models that could enhance the understanding of the main results. Undeniably, qualitative studies excel in valuing oratory words and different forms of oral expression that lead us to opt for the easiest path, the textual one. However, we know that the excess of segments of participants' speeches, whether from focus groups or interviews, leads the reader to make leaps in their reading. Visual forms would be alternatives, such as the Venn-Euler diagram, which serves the purpose of representativeness of sets and could easily be used to represent the presence of themes or positions between focal groups. In this sense, software can help present new models (e.g., networks, word clouds). The articles analyzed that used them also used tables and graphs to present the results (Cunha et al., 2020).

Still concerning the innovations in the use of focus groups, the advent of the COVID-19 Pandemic was undoubtedly an essential driver for their migration to online environments. Although all methodological recommendations for face-to-face groups remain virtual, additional challenges have been posed. The landmarks of the focus groups are the interaction processes, which in the virtual modality can become less spontaneous due to the need to organize speech and the loss of part of the paralinguistic language, as highlighted by

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). Furthermore, possible connection failures cause undesirable interruptions or poor quality of the observation process. On the other hand, the possibility of participation by people geographically distant or with mobility difficulties is expanded (Oliveira et al., 2022).

By way of conclusion, although our intention was not to carry out a systematic review respecting the protocols that guide it, we sought to make use of some of its steps, articulating with integrative review guidelines, to obtain a critical panoramic view of the growth of the use of focus groups in Psychology research in Brazil over the last two decades. The limited presence of national articles on focus groups before the 2000s justifies the temporal spectrum. We also highlight that the study has limitations that need to be considered, given that focus groups are multiplying, being present in Brazilian journals from other classification strata and in international literature. Therefore, we cannot guarantee that this portrait represents the general picture of empirical studies that use focus groups.

Reading the 62 articles reporting empirical research that used focus groups in the last twenty years allows us to corroborate the expressive and diversified growth of this technique/method in several sub-areas of Psychology in the Brazilian context. We have witnessed some advances in terms of its range of applications and the generation of inputs, mainly for improving work processes, actions in the health field, and approaches to urgent social issues. However, we identified some weaknesses that need to be observed by those who view focus groups as essential for producing knowledge in qualitative studies. The best alignment between objectives, theoretical framework, and methodological procedures, including selection and composition of groups, script, forms of analysis, and data presentation, will increase the chances of the results arising from these studies being considered valid and reliable in the scientific and professional community, given their relevance as a tool for evaluating and planning practical actions.

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Authors' Contribution:

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of this study, to data analysis and interpretation, and to the manuscript revision and approval of the final version. All the authors assume public responsibility for content of the manuscript.

Associate editor:

Clarissa Mendonça Corradi-Webster

Received: Mar. 31, 2023

1st Revision: Jul. 06, 2023

Approved: Jul. 15, 2023

How to cite this article:

Gondim, S. M. G., Carneiro, L. L., Morais, F. A., Peixoto, L. S. A., Moscon, D. C. B., & Andrade, R. S. (2023). Focus groups in Brazilian research: Current scenario and methodological challenges. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 33, e3324. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3324>