Focus Groups and Measuring Empowerment

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Introduction

Focus groups have traditionally been the mainstay of qualitative evaluation work as they can provide a more efficient approach than household surveys and they can also provide measures of social capital and community responses to a particular issues and development interventions. Focus groups however are used less in quantitative studies due to the often nebulous nature of the responses, and the difficulty in verifying the extent, in more or less accurate numerical terms, a particular view might be held. This paper looks at the experiences of using focus group interviews as a means of gathering data on the level of empowerment or personal agency that aid recipients had experienced as a result of aid interventions, and being able to use the data for numerically-based statistical analysis.
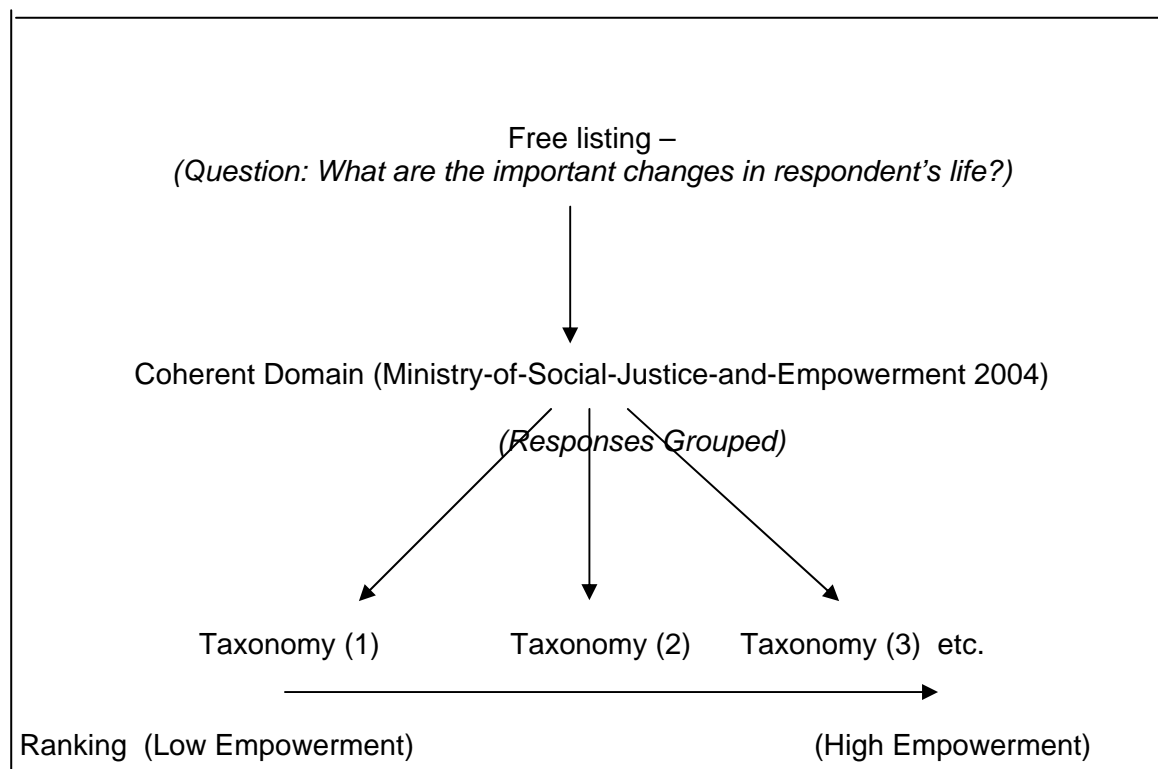
The paper examines first how empowerment might be measured when it comes to the self-help group work of NGOs and what the factors are that influence empowerment outcomes in poorer and marginalised groups. Both a quantitative and qualitative analyses are necessary if meaningful insights are to be gained. A qualitative analysis is necessary to identify the key factors in, and indicators of empowerment, given its rather nebulous nature and largely cognitive meanings; rather than trying to identify empirical proxies that may or may not be valid in a particular context. The challenge for meaningful research is to be able to score and rank these qualitative measures so they can be statistically analysed, to get some indication of the relative importance of a range of factors in achieving empowerment outcomes in NGO work, and this is where the focus group approach was seen as the most viable, and establish if there are causal relationships or merely coincidental associations. The approach taken was to interview around 70 self-help groups as focus groups from the set of NGOs being studied analysis the date, and then follow this is with further interviews of the leadership and staff of the participating NGOs to verify and provide further meaning to the findings, and finally two workshops were held to discuss the issues raised from the self-help group survey results. The result of the study pointed to 'agency' as being a key indicator of empowerment, and time and accountability to the aid recipients as key causal factors.

The Research

The research involved a survey of 15 NGOs and 77 self-help groups supported by those NGOs. The NGOs were chosen using purposive sampling (Sandelowski 2000), which in practice meant that in the two main districts surveyed, a list of the NGOs working in the district was obtained, and from this list five NGOs were chosen to represent, to some degree, the range of characteristics and sizes of NGOs. They were chosen in terms of scale (the numbers of constituents or aid recipients, and numbers of staff), values, and target group. For each NGO the self-help groups were chosen to select a range of ages of groups, and the castes of the women with whom the NGOs were working. The research with the self-help groups used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques (Hines 1993; Sandelowski 2000), with the primary methodology being a group survey involved the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from women's groups, and also as a source of the women's narrative of empowerment. This data was also enumerated and statistically analysed to establish the scope and relevance of the findings (Hines 1993).

The basis for using the two-stage mixed-method approach described above in the data analysis was to enable some level of triangulation (Hall and Rist 1999) by using different data sources including statistical rankings, personal narratives, and NGO records. (Sandelowski 2000). The key concepts being analysed: empowerment and accountability are normative, and not easily subject to empirical testing as they can be explained differently in different cultural settings. Poor women in India are not a homogenous group and no one woman's voice reflects that of all, or even many, marginalised women. Experiences vary across regions of India and that context specific analyses around empowerment are required (Murthy 2001). Using a predetermined survey approach in which respondents are 'led' through a series of possible or expected outcomes can lead a range of normative biases where people respond in the way they think you are looking for or expecting (Hines 1993). The very act of asking the question sets up a power relationship between the researcher and the subject that can lead to problems with the quality of the data being collected (Goetz 2001; Reid and Vianna 2001).

Figure :   Methodology to Empowerment.

Free listing –
(Question: What are the important changes in respondent's life?)

Coherent Domain (Ministry-of-Social-Justice-and-Empowerment 2004)

(Responses Grouped)

Taxonomy (1)   Taxonomy (2)   Taxonomy (3) etc.

Ranking (Low Empowerment)   (High Empowerment)

The focus group survey used open-ended discussion techniques, and allowed more time for free-flowing discussions within the groups, with the researcher sitting with the groups in an informal manner, and providing background information and the like. For the quantitative analysis the interview data was then put into a series of likert scales. This involved a series of steps: *free-listing* the responses to an open-ended question on changes people had experienced in their lives over time; grouping these lists into *taxonomies*, or classifications; and finally, the taxonomies were used to determine a *coherent domain* that positions the items on a list in a way which is more or less consistent across respondents (Hines 1993). These were then enumerated and ranked to produce a series of interval data as an ordinal rank (Hines 1993). The taxonomies that were identified for empowerment were the capacity to: go out of the house; interact with officials; and participate in local government processes.

These ranking reflected the degree of change the respondents indicated they had experienced. This was further corroborated in the interview by not only looking at the information *per se* but also by examining the interviewees' approach to providing the information, and their level of participation (Poland and Pederson 1998). This approach is similar to a grounded-theory approach, which inductively develops measures, and then groups and codes them (Webler and Tuler 2000). By using open-ended questions and an analysis of the responses, the indicators of empowerment were developed and then described in terms of the broader empowerment literature in relating to 'agency'. These findings and associated explanations were then compared with other similar research, and further qualitative research that looked at how the NGOs themselves define and assess empowerment.

Measuring the Variables that Affect Empowerment

The survey chose its focus groups SHGs, by taking a sample from the list the NGOs provided of the self-help groups it was working with. The use of focus groups has the advantage of capturing more information in a given time than an individual interview; and there are also natural advantages in using a focus group in that it provides a collective testimony and '…emphasises empathy and commonality of experience and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation' (Madriz 1998) p.116). Typically, the interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours and sought factual data in terms of details of the group members, the village and the group and these were followed up with open-ended questions to elicit information on changes to their lives and how decisions are made. The semi-standardised structure allowed for discussion within the groups of the issues as they emerged. There were six broad areas covered in the surveys:

- characteristics of the village itself in terms of population, caste, schools and other social amenities such as water supply, formal and informal groups and associations in the village;

- structure of the self-help group in terms of membership, and their endowments such as education and caste;

- decision-making in the SHG;

- the accountability mechanisms the sponsoring NGO has with the groups;

- changes to SHG members in terms of what they had learnt, what they had gained in terms of assets, and how their lives had changed;

- village social capital such as decision-making processes and the broader support mechanisms within the village.

The Analytic Framework

Following the survey the ranked numeric data were analysed using non-parametric Spearman tests to calculate the correlation or ρ value of a sample size of 77 groups. This particular test was chosen to avoid assuming a specific distribution for the data. While the sample was relatively small and difficult to randomise due to access difficulties etc., the statistical test gives some indication of the relative importance of certain factors in NGO work on empowerment. A much larger and more complex study would be required to provide a higher level of confidence in the results. Empowerment was the dependent variable in the correlation analysis, with the key independent variables being accountability of the NGO with the groups; and the number of years the group had been

meeting together. Other variables based on the endowments of the groups were also tested, but found not to be significant.

Table2 Results of Spearman Rank Correlation

n =77; Empowerment is the dependent variable.

Independent Variables	*Mean*	*SD*	ρ	*p-value*
Accountability	2.610	1.1546	0.35	0.0018**
Caste	2.513	1.5894	-0.17	0.1334
Education	1.883	1.3176	0.05	0.6608
Land	2.591	1.3370	-0.13	0.2444
Village SC	2.948	0.6766	0.06	0.6195
Change in SC	0.630	0.4700	0.22	0.0589
Size of Group	22.234	19.5737	0.04	0.7358
Years of Group	3.653	2.4516	0.26	0.0240*

Empowerment

Empowerment was looked at in terms of the notion 'agency' through a series of proxy questions. These questions explored the group members' perceptions of what they had learnt as a result of being active in the group; the key changes in their lives in the past few years, and whether these changes were related to group membership. Finally the questionnaire explored the group members involvement in broader village life including local government, dealing with community issues, etc. This provided data about the change in personal agency the women experienced as a consequence of being a member of a group; as well as what might be called the breadth of empowerment, that is, to the extent that the different members experienced change within a particular group. Other questions relating to empowerment were looked at outcomes in terms of what people had learnt and assets gained.

The numeric coding was done by grouping the responses into the broad five categories that or emerged from the surveys. These became the *taxonomies* or capabilities that defined empowerment for these women:

i)   the ability to go out of the house;

ii)   to meet with officials;

iii)   to travel independently outside the village;

iv)   to attend village meetings etc.; and

v)   to be able enter political processes.

A score was then given as to the level of empowerment that had been 'experienced' by members of the group with a ranking of 0-5 with 0 being for 'no change' in empowerment and 5 for the highest outcome which could be expected within that context for these groups. The ranking scores and range were determined by the researcher, based on the

responses of the women themselves, and the priority the women gave to a particular factor, and then verified by existing research. Nevertheless, the ranking is to some extent normative, and is based in part on the values and judgements made by the researcher, as well as the testimonies of the respondents. It also has the weakness of an inherent assumption that the 'gap' between each numeric factor is constant, but it does provide some means to gain an indication of the extent of the changes identified by qualitative methods.

The ranking had two components: the content of the responses; and the number of the members of the group who responded. For example, if only a small proportion of group members answered, a lower score was recorded for a particular indicator (such as going out of the house), than if the whole group responded. This method of ranking can be a little problematic in that the social and cultural context of the interview itself may limit the response of some members of the group, given the discussion was held with a foreign man sometimes at relatively short notice, with the discussion on topics that the group did not normally talk about. The responsiveness of the group itself, however, can also be seen as a measure of empowerment in that people with greater agency would be less constrained in different and new social situations.

The Results on Levels of Empowerment

The main findings of the study are that first, in terms of empowerment; women themselves identify strongly with notions of 'agency' in how they described the key changes that have occurred in their lives. These changes (often albeit subtle) in power relations with those with whom the women interact (through their increased agency), were ranked by the women - in terms of importance - ahead of more tangible outcomes such as increased incomes. The second finding is that there is a strong correlation between empowerment and those NGOs those with strong 'downward' accountability mechanisms. These findings support the notion that empowerment within women's lives, particularly in terms of 'agency', is stronger if the women have a direct role in some of the institutional processes of the organisation that facilitates that change (in this case NGOs).

Most of the responses from the women's self-help groups emphasised a few key indicators of the changes in the lives of their members, and provided an insight into empowerment. These indicators related primarily to improvements in the 'agency' of the women. The responses describing these changes can be categorised broadly as: autonomy of action; changes in family decision-making; participation in community decision-making; and, advocacy on broader social issues. An important finding is that to the open-ended question on 'change', there was little mention of gaining assets or increased incomes as such, but a number of respondents did refer to the reduced cost of credit. This may be because increased stability in incomes, the associated increase in certainty in the household economy, would be important in their lives.

Table 2 Summary of Empowerment Responses

Key Change	Go Out of House	Gain Family Respect	See SHG as Important	Attend Village Meetings	Deal with Officials	Social Advocacy	Engage in Business	Strong Influence in Community
No. Responses (n=77)	37	21	31	21	28	17	15	13

These changes as described went beyond the cognitive of how women 'felt', but also how they described these changes as leading to a tangible effect on their lives. Table 2 summarises the number of responses to the identified key changes. The next section will examine the factors that led to these empowerment outcomes.

Accountability of the NGO to the Group

One of the key questions for this research was whether there was a positive correlation of accountability with empowerment; the scores for accountability were derived from the extent of the formal and informal consultative and reporting processes of the NGO to the constituency. The range of accountability mechanisms of the study NGOs had in place, ranged from staff listening and responding to the needs of the self-help groups, to management meeting regularly with these groups; with the highest levels of accountability being given to those with formal mechanisms such as regular meetings, which placed high level of control by the constituency, not only of programs, but even in terms of the strategic direction of the NGO.

The results showed a strong correlation (a positive ρ value significant at the one per cent level) between the accountability of the NGO to the groups, and the level of empowerment of group members. To analyse the accountability mechanisms that NGOs have towards their constituencies the NGOs studied have been notionally divided into three broad groupings (based on the level of formality of the accountability processes they have in place: *informal* processes; *semi-formal* processes; and *formal* mechanisms for discussing their work with constituents, leading to a degree of shared control by constituents. These divisions are to some extent arbitrary and are made for the purposes of describing the accountability processes.

Informal Processes

These NGOs did not see it as important to have mechanisms to take on the views of the constituency in terms of their agency direction, priorities, and other similar matters. They see themselves primarily as service providers or charitable organisations, and therefore the need for formal and semi-formal processes are less important to them than if they were social change agents, where they would see have a more representative role. Empowerment, for this group of NGOs is through the increased opportunity provided by the services or the work of the NGO is involved in, and the consequent increase in the range of choices available to the participants of the programs. The constituents have the choice of availing themselves of the services or not if they see these services as relevant in their lives. Staff and management of these NGOs felt their interactions are characterised by a sense of solidarity with their constituency, and they were mindful of their needs and priorities. While the relationship was informal it was very real, and involved a wider group of staff or management than the project staff involved in the project. Overall, this group of NGOs argued that the formal accountability is elsewhere either to their boards, donors, or government, and their accountability derives from the provision of specialist services that are widely recognised as being community priorities, and for which there is some need for commonality of approach. Others felt that if they were unable to meet the raised expectations of the community they may have some difficulties in their programs and lose the confidence of their constituency.

Semi-formal Processes

Other NGOs in the study readily acknowledged the importance of some level of accountability to their constituency, and had put in place a number of what could be

described as semi-formal processes for reporting back to the communities with whom they were working. In addition to the practice of management regularly meeting with the constituents, these organisations had in place processes for taking on board the priorities of the constituents (to some extent), and the programming processes were flexible enough to reflect these priorities. However, in these cases the constituency did not directly participate in the organisation's business. While representatives from the groups attend annual meetings and make suggestions, in any strict sense of the word they did not feel part of the organisation. Nevertheless, the management saw some importance in being accountable to the community they were serving and had set up processes to reflect that.

Formal Processes

These NGOs relied on strong personal associations and formal feedback mechanisms to provide constituent views for management to consider in programming. These mechanisms varied considerably among the NGOs surveyed, but reflected the approaches the organisations had taken to overcoming the dilemma of being an organisation with a public benefit purpose (rather than a mutual organisation) while at the same time being able to be held to account by their constituency. The process adopted by IDS encourages board contact with the constituency so it is directly in touch with the constituents. Each board member meets with a number of groups in a particular village, or group of villages, prior to board meetings. In this way board members can perform a representative function by putting the constituent's point of view at the highest level, even though they were not elected by the constituency.

SNDT, on the other hand has regular and direct staff dialogue with an open forum of constituents the waste Pickers Union — KKPKP. This takes the form of a monthly meeting between the six staff of SNDT and two representatives of the waste-picker women from each of the 100 slums in which SNDT is working. Around 50 women usually attend these meetings and the discussion is very robust and open. For SNDT these processes were adopted by the organisation because they felt that if empowerment was to occur then the women themselves should exercise a large degree of control, not only over the program but also of the NGO staff directly. In this way they would be able to claim some ownership over both the NGO and the program. In effect SNDT was a contractor to the waste-picker women and their union.

Conclusion

The finding of this research is important and it can be argued that it would be difficult to achieve these results without a focus group approach to data collection. These three broad categories of accountability of NGOs as non-representative bodies to their constituency are important as they show the various mechanisms of accountability that NGOs can have without themselves being membership organisations. This then links back to the analysis of the empowerment data that show a positive correlation with the accountability mechanisms and empowerment outcomes. The finding of the follow-up study with the participating NGOs is that there are accountability relationships short of formal membership structures in which NGOs can account for their work to their constituency, and that these are important for strong empowerment outcomes for that constituency.

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