

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND RESULTS OF CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS IN THE STUDY OF THE OPINION OF CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND BY LABOR MIGRATION

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Abstract *Focus group interviewing is a technique frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. In this article, I propose to present the experience of conducting focus group interviews with children, carried out within the project Children left behind by labor migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families in the European Union. In order to obtain better qualitative results, the research sought the free expression of the opinion of all respondents participating in the research. This aimed to highlight the various possible negative aspects related to the phenomenon of transnational families and children left without care whose parents are away working abroad. The guide for moderation of focus groups with children was structured in five modules. It included topics related to perception of migration and its impact on transnational families and children left without parental care, caring for the child after the parents leave, the changes that occur after the parents' migration, existing social services in the community and future perspectives of children. Each module, the experience of conducting focus group interviews and the results of the opinion study of children left behind by labor force migration were presented and analyzed in depth in the article.*

Key words: *focus groups, sociological researches, children, transnational families, labor migration.*

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Introduction

Focus group interviewing is a technique frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. This method uses the generation of ideas within groups and is applied in the social sciences since the 1930's. It belongs to the category of qualitative data collection techniques for analyzing perceptions, people's motivations, feelings, needs and opinions. (Lindsay & Hubley, 2006)

The "focus group" technique involves a focused discussion that aims to provide a complex of qualitative information regarding people's perceptions, feelings, motivations, needs and opinions. This technique is a planned group discussion, organized to obtain perceptions related to a strictly defined area of interest, carried out in a permissive environment. The discussion is relaxed and often pleasant for the participants who share their ideas and perceptions; group members influence each other, responding to ideas and comments. (Kreuger, apud. Marlow, 1993: 55-56)

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One of the important characteristics of this technique is its complexity, both by the way it is carried out, but also by the method of achieving the proposed objectives, naturally bringing the participants together in a united group. The focus group technique is focused on the participants' development of pleasure for the discussion, which takes place in a positive climate and develops natural strategies to avoid or reduce communication misunderstandings regarding the discussed topic. Another interesting feature, specific to the "focus group" technique, is the possibility to modify or even completely change the opinions of the participants until the end of the discussions. (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, Mukherjee, 2018)

Among the basic objectives that can be achieved in a sociological research by using the "focus group" technique can be mentioned:

- generating reactions, impressions, opinions regarding some services, programs, institutions or other objects of interest;
- establishing the ways in which those in the target group think and talk about the object of interest;
- diagnosis of the problems that a new program or service may raise;
- the interpretation of previous results obtained by other means (Cojocaru, 2003).

A central role in the successful conduct of the discussion within the "focus group" technique as well as in achieving the research objectives belongs to the moderator, who can often be the researcher himself. The moderator is the one who provokes the expression of opinions and directs the discussion. The moderator's difficult task is to provide everything necessary for the interview and to prepare himself.

The duties of the moderator in the smooth running of the discussion are multiple, among which can be mentioned those of encouraging all group members to participate in the discussions, stimulating the expression of various opinions, supporting the dynamics of the discussion, encouraging the clarification of points of view and explaining statements and affirmations ambiguously formulated. At the same time, a good moderator must be a skilled communicator, avoid presenting his own judgments and evaluations on the topic discussed or on the discussion itself, not presenting himself as an expert and not asking biased questions (Cojocaru, 2003).

In the researches that studies the opinion of children, the focus group technique is welcome, because it provides quite relevant results, due to the fact that children talk to each other and are more open. When the child's discussion with an adult takes place, a subjective barrier appears. Children may be embarrassed by some questions, they may try to say what they were taught by their parents, at school, etc. The focus group technique allows the generation of honest responses in a relatively free discussion among peers. Thus, the moderator (researcher) has the task of creating the necessary atmosphere and guiding the discussion in the necessary direction. In this context, I believe that in the research that adults do with children, those introductory discussions are welcome, which would relax the children and create a correct attitude towards their role in the research.

1. Literature review

For developing this article, was analyzed literature concerning the subjects of focus group method in research, studies about the situation of migrant people, transnational families and the well-being of children left behind by labor migration. Also was studied some articles concerned with the use of focus group discussion methodology.

2. Data and Methodology

In this article, I propose to present some aspects of conducting "focus group" interviews with children, carried out within the project Children left behind by labor migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families in the EU (CASTLE) ICMPD/2021/ MPF- 357-004.

The aim of the project is to carry out an in-depth study on the situation of children left without parental care following migration and to determine the impact of labor migration policies and legislation on the protection of children in the Republic of Moldova. The project also aimed to better inform transnational families and representatives of public authorities regarding the realities and practical aspects related to labor migration.

The field research included: 36 in-depth interviews with adults (parents who have gone to work abroad, stay-at-home parents whose spouses have gone to work abroad, carers), 4 in-depth interviews with children whose parents have been away to work abroad, 11 in-depth interviews with representatives of public authorities, 4 focus groups (2 with adults and 2 with parents). The research project was carried out by Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova in partnership with the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, and the Oleksandr Yaremenko Ukrainian Institute of Social Research, who also initiated research into the given phenomenon in their countries (CASTLE Opening Report, 2022).

The research tools (interview guides) were coordinated with colleagues from Babeş-Bolyai University and adapted to the realities of the Republic of Moldova. Also, in the framework of the research, the relative observance of a territorial representativeness, as well as from the point of view of the social structure of the respondents, was followed. For a closer approach to the real situation, the interview guides were consulted with the adult and with child co-researchers.

In order to obtain better qualitative results, the research sought the free expression of the opinion of all respondents participating in the research. This aimed to highlight the various possible negative aspects related to the phenomenon of transnational families and children left without care whose parents are away working abroad. Also, within the research, solutions or intervention methods from the public authorities were sought to overcome the problems faced by transnational families.

Presentation of the participants and the discussion rules, with the presentation of the discussion topic, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, the rules of the group discussion and the retrieval of socio-demographic data.

The guide for moderation of focus groups with children was structured in 5 modules and included the following topics:

- **Module I.** *The perception of migration and its impact on transnational families and children left without parental care.* This module included topics related to how is the life of children with parents working abroad; how does the life of children whose parents go to work abroad differ from that of children whose parents are at home; what are the difficulties faced by children with parents working abroad; what are the joys of children with parents working abroad? During the discussions, was expected stories will be told with examples from the lives of children, friends, acquaintances and colleagues (at home, at school and in the community).
- **Module II.** *Caring for the child after the parents leave,* covered subjects related to questions with whom do the children stay whose parents went to work abroad; are children asked who they want to stay with; what new responsibilities do children have in the household after their parents leave? Next topics were intended to determine the opinion of children about the people who take care of the children whose parents are away working abroad, how do they behave with children whose parents are gone? As well, what is their opinion about the school life of children whose parents are away working abroad, what changes are occurring (frequency, success, relationships with friends, relationships with teachers); how do children with parents working abroad spend their free time? Are there differences in the way these children spend their free time compared to those whose parents are at home; are there any offline or online groups of children with absent parents (What kind of groups? How they were formed? What is discussed in them?)
- **Module III.** *The changes that occur after the parents' migration* included topics regarding the changes in children's lives after their parents leave abroad (in communication with departed parents, communication with remaining grandparents, health issues, etc.). How are children's perceptions of child migration changing; are there differences in how parents' migration was seen at the beginning and 1-2 years after the parents' departure; what did children with parents working abroad earn and what have they lost? Who do children tell their secrets to? What about joys, fears, pains?
- **Module IV.** *Existing social services in the community* covered subjects related to questions like who provides emotional, moral and psychological support to children with parents working abroad and how? What should be done in the Republic of Moldova for children whose parents are away working abroad, who should do it, where and how? What can be done for these children in the school and locality?
- **Module V.** *Future perspectives* was dedicated to advices that children would like to give to other children whose parents are abroad.

As mentioned above, 2 online focus group interviews were conducted. At the discussions were present two adults, a moderator and an assistant. The moderator is

important to the discussion not only to manage existing relationships, but also to create a relaxed and comfortable environment for unfamiliar participants. Similarly, the assistant's role includes observing non-verbal interactions and the impact of group dynamics and documenting the general content of the discussion, thus completing the data (Kitzinger, 1995). The first interview was conducted with 6 children, all from the countryside aged between 14 and 16. The second interview was conducted with 4 children, all from rural areas aged between 15 and 17. For all children, one or both parents were abroad for work.

3. The organization and conducting of focus group interviews with children

At the beginning of the interview, the moderator announced the topic of the discussion and in order to avoid tensions and prevent possible frustration of the children, he started with the presentation of images with double interpretation, such as those shown in fig. 1:

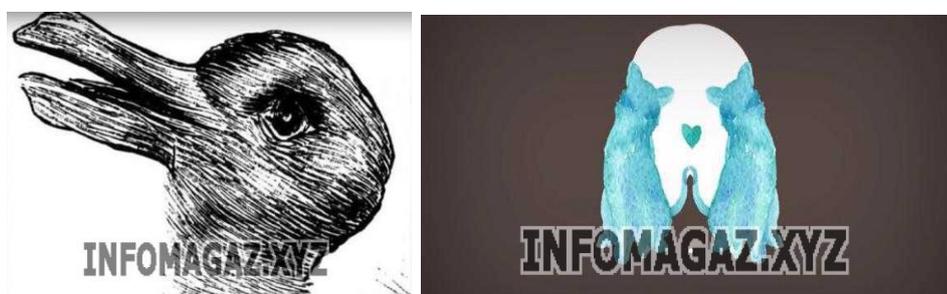


Fig. 1 Double images

The children were asked to say what they see in these pictures. Of course, the interpretations were different, which allowed the moderator to conclude that there cannot be right or wrong answers, both answers have the right to life. In this context, the answers to the following questions will not be interpreted as right or wrong. The moderator and assistant explained the purpose of the research to the young respondents and assured them that their answers would be coded, thus preserving anonymity.

This introduction was welcome, because initially the children felt like they were in lessons, in front of the teacher, a phenomenon that could be observed from the non-verbal expressions. After the presentation of the images and the introduction by the moderator, the state of tension that prevailed both in the first focus group and in the second, decreased significantly.

Children in the first focus group connected their webcams to introduce themselves, but during the discussion, they preferred to disconnect them. They probably felt freer that way. The children in the focus group were quite active, open and quite honest. They told their stories and sometimes it looked like they could not wait to tell them. In some cases, they complemented the each other sayings.

In the second group, the children did not really want to open up. At first, there was an attitude of mistrust. It was the impression that they considered, they will not be understood, but if they are, nothing will change for them. To support the dynamics of the

discussion, the moderator and the assistant told some stories from their childhood, thus challenging the children to express their attitude towards the changes taking place in modern society. Such an intervention aimed to move the children from the role of simple respondent to the role of expert. This intervention was successful because the children felt important, saw that their opinion matters and adults perceive it.

4. The analysis of the focus groups' discussion results

The first part of the discussion, the perception of migration and its impact on transnational families and children left without parental care was quite dynamic in both focus groups. In general, children find life with their parents to be easier. In their opinion, children left at home, without parents receive less love and warmth. These children develop and mature faster. In addition, the fact that children with absent parents become more serious, more responsible is even seen as an advantage. Some children see the parents' departure as an obstacle to a good school success. They mentioned that this charge is placed on the children's shoulders, because some grandparents are already old and cannot handle household chores well. The children do not consider themselves special, about half of their peers are either with their parents gone or divorced.

Quotations:

"I don't find much difference and I don't think that we are different from someone else, different from the community, or something like that, so I think we don't have to be separated or anything." (A. FG_C_02)

"I don't feel much difference that my mother is not there no, and we are not very different from anyone else, I don't feel the difference." (P. FG_C_02)

"Well, no, at school everything is ok, we don't differentiate between children whose parents are at home and those who are away." (M. FG_C_02)

The lack of parents is felt more by those who are not with grandparents or close relatives, but all children would like to see their parents more often.

Children do not consider themselves to have any more special problems than others. Rather, they believe that parents have greater emotional, moral and material pressure.

The material part is positively appreciated by the children, but this does not compensate for the lack of parents. When asked if they had any joy after their parents left to work abroad, the children answered negatively.

Quotations:

"... actually it's very difficult because it doesn't always consist of money in any case, but anyway the parental warmth will always be missing, it doesn't matter how much money they send and stuff like that, it doesn't always boil down to money". (I. FG_C_01)

The set of questions regarding the care of the child after the departure of the parents was discussed quite dynamically within both focus groups. Several children said they were morally prepared by their parents before they left. But not one of them was asked who they would like to stay with. Because most of them stayed with their grandparents, who are

older than their parents, they have to help them. They mentioned, however, that their colleagues with parents being at home also have certain responsibilities related to household chores. The older children in the family, who were still quite young at the time, had to participate in the upbringing and education of the little ones. According to the focus group participants, children with absent parents may not manage their time properly, take too much time off and fail to do their homework.

Quotations:

“When my parents leave, they always prepare me morally that I have to listen to my grandmother, that she can't always do much and we have to help her.” (P. FG_C_01)

“I often have to cook, this happens very often...”. (I. FG_C_01)

“...I know a little girl who stayed with her aunt and she was in the 5th grade, her aunt couldn't make it, she also had two children, they were small and the little girl had to stay as a nanny, she went to school, helped them with their lessons, she was sweeping the yard, lighting the fire, clean, things that are good in life and she said that this thing was good for her, she doesn't judge her aunt because she didn't teach her bad things, she didn't hate her, she told her that you have to do this, that, that and then you go to do your lessons, you go to play, go for a walk, it was a kind of experience”. (L. FG_C_01)

“I was lucky, my mother left, ..., but I was very lucky with my grandparents, because they helped me, fed me, -they gave me everything I need, my grandmother is a teacher”. (L. FG_A_02)

There are also children who have stayed with a stranger. Of course, those who are with their grandparents feel well and the lack of parents is felt not so badly. They all communicate with their parents regularly; their parents take an interest in their lives. In school life, children consider that there are no special changes, they have the same behaviors, the same aspirations as other children. However, children do not consider that they have more responsibilities than those whose parents are not abroad.

“No, it's not a relative, after my parents broke up, my mother's relatives don't talk to me, ..., and it also happens from my father's relatives too they don't talk to me because look, mom is so bad, and mom's relatives all say it's so bad and no, they don't talk to me, but neither do I to them.” (M. FG_C_02)

It was said that some teachers are prejudiced and believe that if the parents are away, then the child does not want to do anything, to learn. Some teachers offended the children.

Quotations:

“I think that the attitude of the teachers differs at school, ... Sometimes they can say "Hey, you're home alone, it means you don't want to do anything,"... (V. FG_C_01)

“Ok, maybe we were more different from other children, the fact that we were dressed better, ... because I had a phone and I was little, or something. I dressed like all the kids, but I was bullied by the teachers more...”. (M. FG_C_01)

The third block of topics about the changes that occur after parents' migration, was unpleasant for the children and the discussions were not very intense. Being small children they were angry with their parents because they left them. But when children grew up, they

understood that parents left for them too. They rather share their secrets with those in whose care they stayed at home. It was mentioned that it is much harder when both parents are away.

All children that participated in the discussion, directly or indirectly, also feel responsibility for the situation related to their parents' departure. This fact was perceived throughout the discussions and on each topic discussed, children through intonation or directly mentioned that their parents left to give them a better future.

Quotations:

“In my case, as a child I grew up with my grandmothers and I was already used to it. The difference is that I grew up, I matured. When I was little, I was always angry with my parents because I didn't understand why they left me. I knew it was because of the money, but of course I wasn't mentally developed enough to really figure it out. But now I'm starting to understand them more and more because I realize it's all for my own good.” (I. FG_C_01)

“... changed was, that I now understand.” (P. FG_C_01)

“... I was younger, I didn't understand why my mother was leaving, she left me, I mean, not that she left me, I mean she left for a long period of time, already with age I understand that here she is gone to work, and to create a better future for her and me”. (P. FG_C_02)

“Money stole my childhood, sometimes I regret it, sometimes I'm glad.” (L. FG_C_02)

The children want their parents to be more integrated in life in Moldova, to visit some beautiful places. They want to encourage the parents, that not everything is so bad in our country. I feel sorry for the parents.

“I'm talking about me personally, I don't see a difference because I see, that my mother goes to work and she doesn't come... I always tell her to go with... and there to see something else from Moldova. This is how it was done in Orheiland, let her see there too, but she doesn't want to. (L. FG_C_02)

The topics where Community Social Services were discussed did not generate to much talks. The majority of children do not expect special actions from the community. They would like more cultural and sports activities to be organized for all children.

They receive emotional, moral and psychological support rather from grandmothers, older sisters and brothers, friends, psychologists, teachers and from God.

Quotations:

“I think that emotional support can be in the case of girls and a friend because sometimes you can really talk about anything, that is, over the years you have gained trust in her and you can tell anything and she always supports you and is even by your side”. (V. FG_C_01)

“... we are part of an association made by father N, there we keep talking about problems in society, about different topics.... Yes ..., with us, the father does this very well, because he can help us with good advice...”. (M. FG_C_02)

The children are waiting that the local public administration will create more jobs so that their parents can work in Moldova.

“...it would be better if there were more jobs and possibly the parents would stay here longer, in Moldova they would work and receive the same, because it is not enough.” (V. FG_C_01)

On the last topic regarding Future prospects and recommendations for other children who are in similar situations, each child was asked to respond. Most believe that it would be best for the parents to take the children with them when they leave, or not to leave at all. They advise other children not to be angry with their parents and to understand that they too are having a hard time.

Quotations:

“In the future I still want to go, I will go, I will go and I will take my mother with me and I will insist that we go somewhere and travel and see new places.” (L. FG_C_02)

“I would take my whole family with me because it is a big mistake to leave children in the hands of someone else, regardless of the circumstances”. (I. FG_C_01)

“If I were a parent, I would take the children if I could find a very good job, they would pay me, that would be normal, but if the job was not settled, I would not take the children”. (D. FG_C_01)

“My advice would be for the children left at home to try to understand and not be angry with their parents for making this decision”. (P. FG_C_01)

“I don't let my child go through what I know I went through. I wouldn't have the courage that my parents had”. (L. FG_C_01)

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be mentioned that in focus group research with children it is very important to create an atmosphere of understanding. Especially since this technique allows the generation of honest responses in a relatively free discussion among peers. Children are more honest, and the behavioral stereotypes imposed by society are not yet so strong when using focus groups interviews. The age difference between the moderator (researcher) is a factor that demotivates children to be open in communication. The mature person is perceived by them as a mentor, not as an equal interlocutor. In this context, the moderator has the task not only to manage the existing relationships, but also to create a comfortable environment for the participants in the discussions. I consider that in the researches that adults do with children, an introductory discussion is welcome, because it would relax the children and will create a correct attitude towards their role in the research. Furthermore, in the discussions held with children in the framework of various sociological researches, the vector of the respondents' attitude towards the researcher cannot be neglected.

The analysis of results of focus group interviews with children, carried out within the project Children left behind by labor migration: supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian transnational families in the EU (CASTLE, 2022) showed, that children left at home,

without parents receive less love and warmth. These children develop and mature faster, they become more serious, more responsible. Directly or indirectly, the children feel responsibility for the situation related to their parents' departure. The majority of children do not expect special actions from the community, they rather want to receive emotional, moral and psychological support from the people around. And, of course most of children believe that it would be best for the parents to take the children with them when they leave, or not to leave at all.

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