Reviewer’s report

Title: An exploration of the influence of ethnic group composition on focus group discussions

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Reviewer: David Morgan

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This article is a rare example of a study that collects data from both homogeneous and mixed focus groups to investigate how the group composition affects the nature of the discussion. As such it has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the literature, but that impact is currently limited by the way that the core issue is framed.

The problem arises because the authors concentrate on what they call “demographic homogeneity” without considering why this kind of shared background might make a difference in their focus group discussions. In general, the key purpose that homogeneity serves is to increase the compatibility of the participants, so they can engage in a free-flowing discussion. Demographic homogeneity can only accomplish so much, however, and similarity with regard to the topic of the research is often more important. One of the primary sources that the authors quote on homogeneity puts it this way: “Whether any given demographic characteristic will affect the compatibility of the participants depends upon the topic of the research” (Morgan, 1998:62).

That point is particularly important for this article because of the way this research creates homogeneity through ethnicity, and then asks directly about ethnicity as a key topic. The authors’ results show that ethnic homogeneity definitely does have an effect on the discussion of ethnic differences as a topic. By comparison, whether the groups are similar or mixed by ethnicity has notably less effect on the participants’ overall discussion of their experiences as stroke caregivers. Thus, ethnic homogeneity has its most important impact when it is directly relevant to the discussion topic.

What I am thus recommending is a shift from an unquestioned emphasis on demographic homogeneity to a more nuanced view of the influences of similarity with regard to both background variables and the research topic.

In terms of Compulsory Revisions, this would require some rewriting in the Rationale section on pp. 4-5 and in the Discussion section on pp. 24-25, but neither of these revisions would alter the core results and conclusions of the article.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have no competing interests.